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The Raceless Novel of the 1930s: African-American Fiction  
by Arna Bontemps, George Henderson, Countee Cullen,  
Jessie Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston

Ronald Glynn Rummage

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Arts

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by Arna Bontemps, George Henderson, Countee Cullen,  
Jessie Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston

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## Abstract

The Raceless Novel of the 1930s: African-American Fiction  
by Arna Bontemps, George Henderson, Countee Cullen,  
Jessie Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston  
Ronald Glynne Rummage

In the 1930s, five African-American novelists produced fiction which de-emphasized racial problems and opted instead for a dispassionate rendering of black life. These writers, perhaps influenced by economic conditions during the Depression, by their own middle-class backgrounds, or by their knowledge of African-American folklore, shunned the predictable racial themes and situations already overused by previous black writers.

The study begins with a survey of African-American fiction before 1930, especially examining James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912) as a predecessor of the raceless novel of the 1930s. The criteria for determining the degree of racelessness in the novels are the apparent freedom of the characters from significant white oppression, the relative absence of propaganda dealing with racial issues, the attitudes of particular novelists toward raceless novels, and the critics' responses to the novels and writers.

Chapter 2 explores two raceless novels that focus primarily on the lower class. Arna Bontemps's God Sends

Ronald G. Rummage

Sunday (1931) deals with the rise and fall of Lil Augie, a jockey. Likewise, George Wylie Henderson covers the life of the sharecropper Ollie Miss in his novel of the same name (1935).

The middle class serves as the focus of the raceless novels analyzed in Chapter 3. Countee Cullen's One Way to Heaven (1932) and Jessie Fauset's The Chinaberry Tree (1931) examine the wealth, education, and social standing of the black residents in Harlem and in Red Brook, New Jersey.

Chapter 4 explores the philosophy and writings of Zora Neale Hurston, whose Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934) and Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) illustrate her training as a folklorist and her strong desire to avoid writing about racial issues.

The study concludes with an analysis of the decline of the raceless novel in the 1940s due to the changing times and the effect on African-American fiction of Richard Wright's militant Native Son and of the work of his followers, the Wright School, who carried on his passion for protest fiction.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Definition and Background of the Raceless

#### Novel: African-American Fiction Before 1930

The history of African-American fiction has its roots in antislavery literature before the Civil War. Such texts were written to disseminate material which would bring about the end of slavery and result in freedom and rights for blacks in America. African-American novels written near the end of the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century remained focused almost exclusively on racial themes, especially exploring the treatment of the American black. So concerned was the writer with his sociological message that his work often degenerated from fiction into a tract that simply asserted the writer's beliefs about such treatment. Continuing to control the content of African-American fiction was the fact that most works were published by white publishers and read by a white readership. These factors often affected what an African-American chose for his subject matter.

In the 1930s emerged a group of novels that seemingly avoid the traditional racial themes and which serve as the subject of this study. These novels, hereafter referred to as "raceless," de-emphasize racial problems and opt instead for a dispassionate fictional rendering whose

desired goal is the creation of art, not propaganda. Raceless novels by the five writers--Arna Bontemps, George Wylie Henderson, Countee Cullen, Jessie Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston--became almost a sub-genre of African-American fiction. Influenced by economic conditions during the Depression, by their own middle-class backgrounds, or by their knowledge of African-American folklore, these novelists shunned the predictable racial themes and situations already overused by previous African-American writers.

The word "raceless" rarely appears in any form in surveys of African-American literature; in fact, only Robert Bone, in The Negro Novel in America, uses the term. Bone's use of "raceless novels" refers to the novels written around 1945-1950 as alternatives to the protest fiction of the Wright School, the followers of Richard Wright. When Bone uses "raceless" as a term, he is describing those African-American novels which primarily use white characters and avoid African-American life. This dissertation, however, interprets "raceless" in an entirely different way. Though the term "raceless" may be interpreted variously, the basic criteria of the 1930s raceless novels explored here are the following: there is little, if any, overt racial tension; there is not much protest; the political and social propaganda does not get in the way; and the work does not depict African-

Americans, in Mary Helen Washington's words, as "defeated, humiliated, degraded, or victimized" (Introduction, I Love Myself When I Am Laughing 16). An application of these criteria to the African-American novel reveals that the first such raceless novel is James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, published in 1912. Departing from the African-American novels that preceded it, Johnson's novel also set the precedent for six raceless novels that followed it, all published in the 1930s.

Before examining the raceless novels of the early twentieth century, though, the reader should understand the established literary world into which this genre emerged. Examining the African-American world before 1930 and the writers and philosophies which molded earlier works provides clearer insights into the raceless novels included in this study. Clearly, Robert Bone, Bernard Bell, and other historians believe that the first significant African-American novelist was William Wells Brown, whose Clotel, or the President's Daughter became the first novel written by an American Negro, though it was published in London in 1853. Brown, a fugitive slave himself, uses his preface to condemn slavery in the United States in general and specifically "persons in high places, especially professed Christians, as the principal reason for the perpetuation of the peculiar institution"

(Bell 38).

In fact, the first section in Brown's Clotel is his own story of twenty years in slavery, aptly titled "Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown." Illustrating that Clotel is an abolitionist novel throughout, Bell adds, "Most of the chapters in Clotel begin with an epigraph underscoring the romance's urgent message: 'chattel slavery in America undermines the entire social condition of man'" (39). Clotel is the story of a mulatto woman and her two daughters who are tragically separated after the mother's white lover casts the three women into slavery. The novel focuses on Clotel, one of the daughters. Commenting on the purpose of the novel, Noel Schraufnagel believes that "the patent propagandistic approach indicates the author's basic concern. He is interested only in exposing the evils of slavery and in refuting the claims of the plantation tradition" (3). Certainly, the ending of Clotel reflects Brown's purpose because Clotel, escaping a gang of slave-chasers, throws herself into the Potomac River, within sight of the White House. About this incident, Bone adds, "The intended irony depends upon Brown's allegation that Clotel was the illegitimate daughter of Thomas Jefferson" (30). To reiterate the evils of slavery, Brown asserts that Clotel's suicide "should be an evidence wherever it should be known, of the unconquerable love of liberty the heart

may inherit; as well as a fresh admonition to the slave dealer, of the cruelty and enormity of his crime" (177).

Even harsher in tone and theme is Martin Delany's fragment of a novel, Blake, or the Huts of America, which was serialized in 1859 in the Anglo-American Magazine. Bell, in fact, concludes, "In characterization and theme Blake is the most radical black novel of the nineteenth century" (51). Bone, however, notes that Delany "departs radically from the Abolitionist formula of broken families and violated octoroons, by treating slavery primarily as an exploitative labor system," and he goes on to compare Delany's views with those of Karl Marx (30). The novel has two major parts: Part 1 describes the fugitive slave Blake in his attempts to organize blacks in the Deep South and to search for his wife, while in Part 2 the action shifts to slavery in Cuba. Despite the fact that Blake is a Cuban revolutionary and the fact that the novel was written primarily for blacks instead of whites, many critics, including Vernon Loggins and Schraufnagel, see Blake as deriving from Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (Bell 51). Derivative or not, the tone is inarguably militant, evidenced by Bell, who states, "Not far removed in tone from the black nationalist sentiments of the 1960s is the militant portrayal of Blake and his reference to whites as 'devils,' 'white oppressor,' and 'alabasters'" (51).

Unlike Brown's Clotel and Delany's Blake, The Garies and Their Friends (1857) by Frank Webb includes no "direct attack on slavery anywhere" (Bell 42). Instead, Webb "is concerned not with slavery but with caste, with the artificial barriers to success which confront the free Negro" (Bone 31). Webb's novel is the story of two families, the Garies and Ellises, both of whom move to Philadelphia from the South. The all-black, lower middle-class Ellis family is contrasted with the interracial Garie family, which consists of "a wealthy white Georgian, his mulatto wife and their two children" (Bell 43). The Garies live happily for a time in Philadelphia until Mrs. Garie's true race is detected. In the mob violence that ensues, Mr. Garie is killed. Likewise, the Ellises encounter problems in the City of Brotherly Love and are "crippled but undefeated by the virulence of Northern race prejudice" (Bell 43). Possibly anticipating the middle-class novels of the 1920s and 1930s, The Garies and Their Friends portrays a very successful black businessman, "a millionaire realtor who buys the white hotel in which he is refused dinner in order to evict the offending owner" (Bell 43). Clearly departing from the abolitionist novel, Webb allows his black characters to succeed ultimately regardless of race.

Bell feels that the black characters in the novel "are determined that whites will respect their class if

not their color" (43). The black millionaire, Mr. Walters, suggests that if black families follow the white middle-class families by attempting to establish their sons in sales at an early age instead of in servant positions, then their children, like those of the white families, will succeed. The millionaire declares, "The boy that learns to sell matches soon learns to sell other things; he learns to make bargains; he becomes a small trader, then a merchant, then a millionaire" (qtd. in Bone 31). Though hard work and determination show some success on the part of the black characters in The Garies and Their Friends, the novel remains "a frontal assault on various sectors of the color line, attacking most directly the problems of mixed marriage, and discrimination in employment" (Bone 31). Bone's use of "assault" and "attacking," Bell's reference to Webb's "didactic purpose to expose Northern racial hypocrisy," and Schraufnagel's evaluation that the novel reveals "the effects of racism without showing much concern for literature as art" combine to verify that Webb's tirade against racism, like those of Brown and Delany, overshadows his abilities to write a good novel (Bell 44, Schraufnagel 3).

Though Harriet Wilson is often omitted from historical accounts of early black writers, Bell devotes a section to her life and her most memorable work, Our Nig, based on Wilson's life as an indentured servant in New

England. Our Nig, published in Boston in 1859, became the first black novel published in the United States instead of England. Bell explains that Wilson's importance as a writer stems from her use of the first interracial marriage involving a white woman and a black man and her development of the mulatto protagonist, the couple's daughter (50). Wilson's mulatto Frado, the indentured servant, endures abuse similar to slavery for several years before exerting her own independence. Able to rise mentally above her physical surroundings, Frado feels "capable of elevation" (125). As a result, she begins a program of self-improvement through reading. Perhaps because Wilson lived in predominantly white New England, she "reveals more familiarity with Euro-American culture than with Afro-American" (Bell 49). The self-educated Wilson begins each of her twelve chapters with an epigraph, each by a white author, and Bell further indicates that "Wilson was influenced more by the sophistication and sentimentality of Euro-American literary tradition than by the Afro-American oral tradition and slave narratives" (50). With her advent as the first black novelist published in the United States, Wilson maintained close ties with the white readership's accepted literary heritage.

These African-American novels written before the Civil War--Clotel, Blake, The Garies and Their Friends,

and Our Nig--offer diverse yet similar views of the race problem in America. To illustrate the novels' differences, Bell writes, "Blake is by far the most politically active, Clotel the most romantic, The Garies and Their Friends the most novelistic, and Our Nig the most original" (55). At the same time, however, Bell finds these works very similar in structure and movement, especially making the point that "anecdotes about the evils of slavery and race prejudice are sensationally cataloged" (55).

Despite the successful production of these four novels between 1853 and 1865, no new African-American novel appeared until 1886 when James Howard published Bond and Free, described by Dickson Bruce, Jr. as "little more than an abolitionist novel published after the Civil War," whose purpose is to examine "the potential gentility of those in bondage and the corruption of the slaveholders in the light of genteel standards" (31). These "genteel standards" predominate in African-American work published through the end of the nineteenth century. According to Bell, "between 1886 and the publication of The Sport of the Gods [by Paul Laurence Dunbar] in 1902, the major literary dilemma of Afro-American novelists was how to be true to their vision of reality and still reach their predominantly white readers" (56). Black writers had two undesirable options: to publish their works themselves or

to compromise; as a result, most of the writers, unable to fund their own publications, resorted to the latter. Bell confirms this fact, noting that most black writers, "chose to compromise, which usually involved a moderation of militancy while persevering in the artistic attempt to counter the white literary distortions of reality and the black experience" (57).

Illustrating both gentility and compromise is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted, published in 1892, which "helped to establish the precedent of developing well-mannered, educated colored characters to offset the stock figures of the plantation tradition" (Gloster 31). Like the antebellum novels, Iola Leroy has elements of the abolitionist novel and uses the tragic mulatto as a character. One difference in her use of the mulatto, however, is that she "stresses the moral duty of mulattoes to repress the urge to pass for white and to inspire others by their selfless dedication to social reform and service to their race" (Bell 58). As she stresses the assumption by blacks of middle-class values, "Harper posits and celebrates the existence of a black community where one can both maintain genteel ideas and find a satisfying way of life" (Bruce 49). Two lesser known African-American novelists, J. McHenry Jones and Pauline Hopkins, also wrote in the genteel tradition. Hugh Gloster remarks that Jones's Hearts of Gold (1896)

makes every attempt to "show Negroes to advantage," and he quotes as proof Jones's description of a reunion of the black Knights Templars: "A like number of no other race in the country, their equals financially, could approach these Afro-Americans in gallantry and orderly demeanor" (qtd. in Gloster 32). Similarly, Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South, published in 1900, illustrates Hopkins's purpose "in an humble way to raise the stigma of degradation from my race" (qtd. in Gloster 33).

At the turn of the century, African-American fiction remained varied in content and tone. Bone states that five black novelists published exactly half of the black novels published between 1890 and 1920 and, therefore, merit discussion as forefathers of the novels to be included later in this study as raceless fiction: Sutton Griggs, Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W. E. B. DuBois, and James Weldon Johnson (29). Of this group of five, the most militant and self-sufficient writer was Sutton Griggs. Schraufnagel claims that Griggs's militancy "was not to be matched for over half a century" (6). Bell calls Griggs "one of the most neglected, controversial black novelists of the early twentieth century" (60). Showing his independence, Griggs established his own printing firm in 1899 and produced novels which became "handbooks of group promotions and

political strategy for his people" (Gloster 56). Griggs's belief that all blacks should become independent emanates from his statement: "The cringing, fawning, sniffing, cowardly Negro which slavery left, had disappeared, and a new Negro, self-respecting, fearless and determined in the assertion of his rights, was at hand" (qtd. in Gloster 56-57).

Indeed, Griggs's first novel, Imperium in Imperio, published in 1899, "vies with Blake as the most thematically radical Afro-American novel of the nineteenth century" (Bell 61). Called by one white critic, William Katz, "too treasonous to be evaluated," Imperium in Imperio advocates that blacks, tired of waiting for the government to improve their living and working conditions, should take the matter into their own hands and revolt (301). The revolutionary hero of the novel, Bernard Belgrave, plans to seize Texas as a separate Negro nation, but the plan never succeeds. Griggs, described by Bone as "almost pathologically antiwhite and scarcely less antimulatto," believed the novel would sell well among blacks (33); when it did not sell, Griggs responded, "I was wrong in expecting support from the race, did not deserve it, or else the race was doing wrong to withhold support" (11). True, Imperium in Imperio was not commercially successful, but Gloster believes the novel important because it "suggests the philosophy that

produced the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other organizations striving for the full participation of the Negro in American democracy" (58). Griggs, however, aware that his militant novel had not sold well, opted instead for apologetic fiction in his later novels, Overshadowed, Unfettered, The Hindered Hand, and Pointing the Way, all published between 1901 and 1908 (Schraufnagel 7).

Less militant than Sutton Griggs was Charles Chesnutt, known better perhaps for his short stories than his novels. Comparing the two, Bruce notes, "If Sutton Griggs dramatized the desperation produced by a racist society, Charles Chesnutt captured the feelings underlying the confrontation with race itself" (163). Chesnutt detested racial distinctions and made every effort to speak out against them. Almost white in appearance himself, Chesnutt "objected to a celebration of racial identity, because, for him, race should have no real meaning, in either biological or social terms" (Bruce 173). Going further, Chesnutt explains that "arbitrary racial distinctions served to undermine all that was good and proper in human relations" (Bruce 174).

Chesnutt's philosophy permeates his novels, especially The House Behind the Cedars, published in 1900. In this novel, Rena Walden "passes," falls in love with a white man, and agrees to marry him. Chesnutt deals with

Rena's feelings of uncertainty as she contemplates the interracial marriage: "He does love me. Would he love me if he knew? . . . I think a man might love me for myself . . . and if he loved me truly, that he would marry me" (75-76). On the eve of their wedding, Rena's fiance', George Tryon, discovers the truth and calls the wedding off. Heartbroken, Rena returns home, where her unhappiness continues when she is molested by the mulatto principal of a school where she teaches. One day, while she is going home from school, Rena reaches the intersection of two paths. Coincidentally, her white former fiance' is coming down one path while the lecherous principal is coming down the other. Feeling confusion over her love for one and hatred for the other, Rena avoids both men by running into the woods where she is later discovered, only to flee to the woods the following day. A black admirer, Frank Fowler, finds her insane; she dies in his arms admitting that Frank "loved me best of them all" (293). After she dies, Tryon arrives, ready to declare his love. Dickson Bruce, Jr. illustrates that the novel's ending, though flawed, does reiterate Chesnut's philosophy: "to show his white readers that racism can hurt whites as much as blacks in the barriers it sets up between individuals" (176).

Chesnut's two other novels, The Marrow of Tradition (1901) and The Colonel's Dream (1905), deal more directly

with problems between the black and white races (Schraufnagel 8). As a result, Schraufnagel maintains that "Chesnutt's fiction suffers as a result of his propagandistic purposes" (9). Bone concurs, saying that Chesnutt "became an overt propagandist, to the detriment of his art" (38). These comments, as well as the melodramatic ending of The House Behind the Cedars, indicate that Chesnutt's message obscured his artistry; in his attempt to address "racism's destruction of the individual soul," he often loses sight of the fact that he is writing a novel (Bruce 178).

Though most of the early African-American novelists strove to write about the plight of the black man in America and the racial barriers that existed, Paul Laurence Dunbar chose to ignore blacks as main characters in most of his novels. Schraufnagel calls him "a popular poet who catered to the tastes of white America" and says that Dunbar "sought to become popular rather than to retain the racial and literary integrity he possessed as a young man" (7, 8). Bone, even more vehement in his comments, accuses Dunbar of "seeking to amuse rather than arouse his white audience" (39). Attempting to avoid racial protest in his novels, Dunbar "usually specialized either in the treatment of white American life or in the perpetuation of the plantation tradition" (Gloster 46). Three of Dunbar's four novels deal mainly with white

characters: The Uncalled (1898), The Love of Landry (1900), and The Fanatics (1901).

Dunbar's other novel, The Sport of the Gods, published in 1902, does deal with black characters, though Bone believes that "the novel reiterates the plantation-school thesis that the rural Negro becomes demoralized in the Urban North" (42). Bruce, however, finds the novel Dunbar's best and notes that The Sport of the Gods is the work of a naturalist. Arlene Elder regards the novel's purpose as to show "the helplessness of all individuals in the face of fate" (141). In the novel, the Hamiltons, a Southern black family, lead a relatively happy life as servants to the Maurice Oakley household. When Oakley's half-brother falsely accuses Berry Hamilton, the father, of theft, Berry goes to trial and then to prison for ten years. The community turns on the remaining Hamiltons, who leave the South to go to New York, Dunbar's "naturalistic world, one in which human hopes and plans come to nothing" (Bruce 95). While in New York, Mrs. Hamilton sees the degradation and estrangement of her children: Joe commits murder and is sent to the penitentiary while Kit enters the theatrical world as a stage dancer. Berry Hamilton, acquitted of his crime, journeys to New York to be with his family, only to find them defeated and virtually destroyed as a family unit. The older Hamiltons return to their former positions as

servants for the Oakleys, but Dunbar stresses the futility of their existence: "It was not a happy life, but it was all that was left to them, and they took it up without complaint, for they knew they were powerless against some Will infinitely stronger than their own" (qtd. in Gloster 50).

Though Chesnutt and Dunbar were the most popular African-American writers of their day, the greatest influence upon the upcoming Harlem Renaissance was W. E. B. DuBois (Davis 5). Arthur Davis claims, "With his vision, his sense of commitment to his people, and a self-assurance that he wore protectively, and sometimes arrogantly, DuBois motivated and molded several generations of middle-class Negroes" (15). His greatest contributions were as the first editor of The Crisis, the leading black periodical at that time, and as a sociologist, especially offering the first in-depth scientific study of urban blacks (Bell 81), but DuBois was also a writer of fiction. As editor and sociologist, DuBois often made statements regarding the role of the black artist and the double-consciousness felt by blacks in general. In his spiritual autobiography, The Souls of Black Folk, DuBois defines double-consciousness as the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (215). The

inner strife felt by the American black, torn between being an American and being an African-American, produces, according to DuBois, "two warring ideals in one dark body" (215). Rather than choosing one over the other, the American black "simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American" (215).

Like Dunbar's naturalistic novel, The Sport of the Gods, DuBois's first novel, The Quest of the Silver Fleece (1911), reflects the naturalistic philosophy of Crane, Dreiser, and Norris. In particular, Norris's The Pit (1903), a chronicle of the wheat industry, serves as a model for The Quest of the Silver Fleece, in which the "silver fleece" is cotton. DuBois shows the importance of this crop when he says, "Cotton was currency; cotton was merchandise; cotton was conversation" (qtd. in Gloster 74). That the novel seems more of an economic treatise than a novel appeared clear even to DuBois who remarked that it "was really an economic study of some merit" (Dusk of Dawn 269).

Regardless of his purpose, DuBois did introduce a new type of heroine in this novel. Zora Cresswell, unlike most of the previous female protagonists in African-American novels, is a very dark girl who works in the swamp and who "is completely lacking in gentility" (Bruce 218). Zora later becomes refined and educated because of the graciousness of a wealthy white lady who

takes her to Washington, D. C. DuBois contrasts Zora's goodness with the impure political world of the whites. Though she is exposed to corruption all around her, "Zora retains her independence of whites--cooperating with them, to be sure, and certainly learning from them, but never letting them determine her path for her" (Bruce 221). In fact, she later returns to the South, takes charge of her own land, and helps the school system. Her achievements indicate that she successfully avoids any temptation to emulate whites and to sacrifice virtue to become like them. Though feeling her double-consciousness at work, she never lets go of her firmly held beliefs and remains "unawed by whites" (Bruce 221).

DuBois wrote four other novels: The Dark Princess (1928) and a trilogy of historical novels from 1957-1961, out of the chronological scope of this study. The Quest of the Silver Fleece, though, best illustrates his development of a new character type and a new philosophy for black writers. While dealing with the double-consciousness, DuBois "gave real substance to blackness and genuine dramatic meaning to the synthesis that would produce a black self-definition" (Bruce 222).

Quite different from any of the African-American writers that had come before him was James Weldon Johnson. Partly because of Dunbar's death and Chesnutt's retirement, Johnson "quickly became the most visible black

writer of his day" (Bruce 230). Johnson is frequently studied for his poetry, but it is his single novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, that brought him the most acclaim. Published in 1912, it became the most influential black novel published before World War I. Critics agree that by emphasizing art and de-emphasizing race, Johnson's novel achieved more than any black novel before it. Bone calls Johnson "the only true artist among the early Negro novelists" and says that "Johnson indisputably anticipates the Harlem School by subordinating racial protest to artistic considerations" (46, 48). Contrasting the novel with the "typical propaganda tract of the period," Bone praises Johnson's work as "a model of artistic detachment" (48).

So that his account would be believed, Johnson chose to publish it anonymously; he felt that it would be more powerfully received if it were presented as a valid autobiography. William Andrews goes so far as to speculate that Johnson's "awareness of the greater receptiveness of American whites to black autobiographies than to black novels" led to Johnson's anonymity (xvi). Johnson also claimed that if the book were less than successful, his name would not be tarnished. Eugene Levy regards Johnson as "the first black writer to use the first-person narrative in fiction," though the nonfictional models of Frederick Douglass and Booker T.

Washington preceded Johnson's work (130). Johnson's use of the unnamed first-person narrator and his anonymous publication of the novel reflect his desire to create a believable work of fiction. Though some friends guessed that Johnson wrote The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, it was not until 1915 that a column positively identified Johnson as the author.

As previously noted, Johnson borrowed elements of the slave narrative in fashioning his Autobiography. In From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative, Robert Stepto compares elements of Johnson's work with the slave narratives and concludes that "perhaps the most notable borrowing from the slave narratives is the device of the authenticating preface" (97-98). The preface of the slave narrative usually confirms the veracity of the narrative and its author. The Autobiography's lack of comment about its author may, as Stepto feels, imply "that, unlike an ex-slave, an ex-coloured man may thrive without the alms of authorial verification" (98). Though the narrator has free mobility in both races, the preface prepares the reader for a look at only the black race, "a composite and proportional presentation of the entire race" (xxxiii, Stepto 98). Stepto further notices that Johnson echoes Dubois's preface in The Souls of Black Folk, a "seminal text in Afro-American letters," published just four years earlier (99).

Besides the authenticating preface, the Autobiography also borrows from the slave narrative the device of rhetorical omissions (Step 105). Frederick Douglass, in his Narrative (1845), avoids details of his escape, not wanting to "run the hazard of closing the slightest avenue by which a brother slave might clear himself of the chains and fetters of slavery" (136). Johnson's most notable rhetorical omissions occur at the beginning of the narrative when he does not divulge the name of the Georgia town in which he was born and at the end of the narrative when he mentions only vaguely that he now enjoys a life in New York, hoping to protect anyone still associated with the narrative (Step 105). While noting that both of these works use rhetorical omissions for authentication, Step 105 also recognizes the difference in the narrators' motives:

While Douglass's rhetorical omissions serve to obliterate social structures and race rituals, the Ex-Coloured Man's omissions appear to be designed only for the exploitation of those structures and rituals; on the one hand, a race is freed, while on the other, a material world is propped up for the immediate comfort of a racially ambiguous few. (106)

One of the keys to the success of Johnson's novel is his complex, nontraditional narrator. Davis calls the

narrator an "anti-hero" and "a weak and vacillating human" who makes choices based on his individual characteristics, not his race (31). Similarly, Bruce notes that the protagonist is different because he "is not the same kind of genteel hero who dominated much of black fiction up to that time" (252). Focusing on the narrator's character and personality, Robert Fleming affirms his complexity and psychological dimensions and believes that Johnson "by means of irony rather than the propagandistic techniques of his predecessors marks a new, more artistic dimension for the black novelist" (40-41). The narrator's feelings toward both the black and white races remain ambivalent throughout the work. From the outset, he desires relief from his "vague feeling of dissatisfaction, of regret, of almost remorse" (1-2). At the same time, however, he wonders why he has chosen to take the reader into his confidence since he is telling a dark secret that he has kept concealed for several years. As the account unfolds, the reader learns details of the secret: the narrator, because of his light skin, has "passed" forever into the world of white America. Yet renouncing his black heritage has brought him little joy, and he ultimately confesses, "I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (154).

Before bringing the narrator to this conclusion, however, Johnson allows him both to participate in and to

observe life as lived by both races. The narrator's light skin, a result of the union of his now-absent Southern gentleman father and his black servant mother, causes him to believe that he is white. Regrettably, his mother never reveals his race to him, even after he admits participating in throwing rocks at a "nigger" in his class at school. The narrator finally discovers his race at age eleven when he mistakenly stands when the principal asks the "white scholars" to stand. The teacher asks the narrator to be seated and "rise with the others" (11). Embarrassed, the narrator rushes home after school to ask, "Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?" (12). Her affirmative reply causes him from that point on to have thoughts, words, and actions that are "colored". He writes retrospectively that blacks in the United States cannot view the world as human beings would because of this dual personality or double-consciousness (14).

Johnson's portrayal of blacks in the novel demonstrates his detached, realistic approach. In fact, on at least two occasions, the narrator seems to take on the role of sociologist when he didactically categorizes the blacks in Jacksonville, Florida, according to their classes and when he refers to four accomplishments of the race as a whole. To determine the class into which each member of the race belongs, the narrator measures each group for "their relations with the whites" (56). His

first class consists of laborers, ex-convicts, and barroom loafers, known collectively as the desperate class. Their common characteristic is their hatred of all white men. Though this class represents only a small proportion of blacks, it "often dominates public opinion concerning the whole race" (56). The second class includes those connected with whites through domestic service. Described as "simple, kind-hearted, and faithful," they have a good relationship with their employers and exhibit little friction (57). The least-known class to whites, according to the narrator, is the upper class, separated as much from the whites as is the desperate class. Though they are "well-disposed toward the whites," very often the whites view them as "putting on airs" (58). Hugh Gloster agrees that the narrator's intellectual rendering of the class situation "set out neither to glorify Negroes nor to malign whites but to interpret men and conditions as he knew them" (79).

Besides describing recognized class distinctions, the narrator enumerates candidly the contributions of the black race. Ambivalently, while calling the African-American contributions "lower forms of art," he does believe that they "refute the oft-advanced theory that they [blacks] are an absolutely inferior race" (63). His list of four consists of the Uncle Remus stories, the Jubilee songs, ragtime music, and the cake-walk. Though

the narrator's personal affinity to the cake-walk and music probably makes their inclusion less than objective, he merely lists these contributions, never stopping to make a true argument for any of them.

In context, Johnson's classification of black cultural contributions seems relevant to the narrator's discussion; unfortunately, at times, Johnson does seem to propagandize when he allows a discussion of the race problem in general. Though the narrator remains silent during such a sharing of ideas by other characters, the autobiographical nature of the work encourages the reader to focus on the narrator's reaction instead of the ideas being presented. The most blatant incident of this propaganda divorced from the novel is the conversation on the Pullman smoking car. The narrator listens as the captive group consisting of a Jew, a college professor, an old Union soldier, and a cotton planter from Texas share their racial views. The narrator remains reticent during the entire dialogue as he hears the Union soldier and Texan argue over which race is the superior one. The Texan says that Southerners "don't believe the nigger is or ever will be the equal of the white man, and we ain't going to treat him as an equal; I'll be damned if we will" (120). The group concludes with a drink and a good laugh. Eventually, Johnson reintroduces the narrator by giving his reaction to the episode; believing that the Texan was

provoicing the attitude of all Southerners, the narrator says, "I was sick at heart" (120). Admittedly, Johnson, like most of the black writers before him, lapses into a few sections of what some critics call propaganda, but he skillfully places it in the realm of autobiography so that it is less intrusive.

Despite the fact that the narrator remains generally detached and shows all classes of black people, he seems much more interested in refined, well-educated black people. Levy, in fact, concludes that one of Johnson's purposes in writing The Autobiography was "to show that there are cultured, sophisticated, respectable blacks" (134). The narrator seems most impressed with a former classmate named Shiny and with a doctor. Shiny befriends the narrator just after the episode in which he finds out that he is black. The narrator looks up to Shiny because he is the best scholar in the class. Because of Shiny's standing in the class, he is called upon to be the primary speaker at the grammar school graduation. Johnson uses Shiny's persuasive speech, Wendell Phillips's "Toussaint L'Ouverture," to make the narrator proud of being black. Shiny's effect on the narrator seems clear when the narrator reveals, "I felt leap within me pride that I was colored; and I began to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honor to the Negro race" (32). These proposed dreams of glory and honor never come true for the narrator;

instead, his conscience is convicted by the appearance of Shiny near the end of the autobiography. Now a professor, Shiny sees the narrator and his white girlfriend together, but he never makes any reference to the narrator's race, which remains unknown to the girlfriend. Realizing, however, that he must now divulge his race to her, the narrator believes that "somehow the 'Shiny' incident gave me encouragement and confidence to cast the die of my fate" (148). When the narrator reveals his race to his girlfriend, she begins weeping inconsolably, and the narrator writes, "This was the only time in my life that I ever felt absolute regret at being colored, that I cursed the drops of African blood in my veins and wished that I were really white" (149). Later, she adjusts to his race, and they marry.

Another successful black character who impresses the narrator is the broad-minded physician, with whom the narrator discusses the race question while returning to New York from Europe. When the physician learns that a white man has changed seats so as not to have to sit next to him, he replies, "I don't object to anyone's having prejudices so long as those prejudices don't interfere with my personal liberty" (110). Without being specific, the narrator also says that the doctor even sympathizes with some white Southern points of view and that he optimistically believes that for blacks in America, the

pworst is behind them. At the same time, however, he resents the "lazy, good-for-nothing darkies . . . who create impressions of the race for the casual observer" and believes that the best members of every race should be used to judge the race as a whole (114). The doctor's views on race, his circle of friends, and his status as a black professional all contribute to the narrator's admiration of him.

While the narrator is impressed by Shiny and the physician, he is much less descriptive of the lower-class blacks and rural blacks. In general, he finds their dialect interesting but is almost repulsed by their bad food, poor living conditions, and unkempt appearance. More specifically, the narrator puts his trust in only one lower-class black character, the Pullman porter who ironically advises the narrator after surreptitiously stealing his money (44-46). The narrator's coverage of the rural blacks he meets is indeed scant, especially since this trip to the South is his "first real experience among colored people" (122). Nevertheless, he avoids description of them, saying that the reading public has seen "log cabins and plantations and dialect-speaking darkies" described more than any other black group (122). As a result, he adds that "it is impossible to get the reading public to recognize him [American Negro] in any other setting" (122).

Like his characterization of the upper-class blacks in the novel, Johnson's characterization of whites is positive, especially if they have wealth or status. Though the narrator's father is absent almost all of the time, since he has a white wife and family, he does manage to visit the narrator and even buys him a piano. The main white character with whom the narrator interacts is a millionaire who is interested in the narrator's ability to play ragtime. Because he likes ragtime and because he likes to be the first to display anything new, the millionaire often invites the narrator to play at his home and later insists that he tour Europe with him for over a year. After becoming "a polished man of the world," the narrator openly discusses with the millionaire the possibility of becoming a successful composer in the South (104). This conversation precipitates the millionaire's giving his opinions on race: he asks the narrator, "Now, why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle, of the black people of the United States?" (105). Again, as with the doctor, the subject of race is discussed unemotionally, and the narrator believes that the millionaire is "entirely free from prejudice" (106). This conversation also encourages the narrator to question whether becoming a successful composer is to better his race or to better himself.

Shiny, the doctor, the narrator's father, and the millionaire impress the narrator much more than the other characters, illustrating that the narrator seems more interested in class than race. Often, Johnson's characters have conversations about strained race relations in America, but the actual black and white characters with whom the narrator comes in contact freely mingle together in most work and social settings, especially in the cigar factory, the gambling establishments, and the nightspot known as The Club. The race relations between the characters are generally good; therefore, when the narrator describes a lynching that he witnessed, the reader is almost as surprised as the narrator. The most violent scene in the novel, its purpose is to show what Southern whites would do if "left alone to deal with the Negro question" (137). Fleming remarks that Johnson's original manuscript indicates that rumors about the lynching victim's crime "deal specifically with rape and murder" (23). The actual novel says only that the narrator and his friend "caught the rumor that some terrible crime had been committed" (135). Johnson's removing the nature of the crime and leaving it as only a rumor suggest his condemnation of Southern whites, whom he describes as "not yet living quite in the present age" (138). At the suggestion "Burn him!," the white crowd becomes "savage beasts" (136). Terrified of

the screams, groans, and burning flesh, the narrator quickly packs his bag and travels North, resolving not to be a Negro anymore. To illustrate his rationalization as he debated his decision, he writes: "I argued that to forsake one's race to better one's condition was no less worthy an action than to forsake one's country for the same purpose" (139). The narrator succeeds both socially and financially as a white man, but as mentioned earlier, he feels shame over abandoning his race, believing that he has been "a coward, a deserter" (153).

In many ways, Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man serves as the transition novel bridging the fiction before World War I and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Besides signaling "the liberation of the Negro novelist from the habitual practice of using the South as a principal setting," it realistically and dispassionately presents all classes of blacks in America (Gloster 80). Chronologically, this novel also becomes the first African-American novel in this study to be considered raceless. When compared with the characteristics of the raceless novel set forth in the opening paragraphs, this novel clearly fits the criteria: there is little, if any, racial tension; it is not a protest novel; the propaganda does not get in the way; and it does not depict blacks as "defeated, humiliated, degraded, or victimized" (Washington, Introduction, I Love Myself When I Am

Laughing 16). True, Johnson does include some propaganda, for which he is sometimes criticized, and the lynching incident, but the emphasis remains on the narrator's reactions in his autobiographical account. Racial issues, then, become not the focus of the novel, but the agency through which the reader observes a complex narrator undergoing a life-changing decision.

Excluding James Weldon Johnson, the other novelists whose raceless works will be included in this study were all at the height of their careers during or near the end of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Between the publication of The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and the birth of the Harlem Renaissance were several very influential historical events. Though historians disagree on the extent to which each of these factors influenced the upcoming movement, most historians point to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, World War I, the surge in population and interest in Harlem, and the Garvey Movement as key influences (Gloster 101-15). Nick Ford believes that the NAACP, which began in 1910, came into prominence in 1914 and through The Crisis, its official publication, became a major influence upon black novelists, who attempted to project the philosophy of The Crisis: "To combat race prejudice by exposing its dangers; to portray the progress of the race and to attack certain attitudes which tend to

phinder progress; to suggest some solutions to the 'Race Problem'" (qtd. in Ford 18-19).

Besides the NAACP, World War I affected the future literature. Gloster claims that World War I was "the most influential force in bringing about the cultural emancipation of the American Negro" (101). Before the war, most African-Americans had reacted rather passively to their position and treatment, but after the war, African-American soldiers returned, "ready to seek and demand full social and political equality in the democracy for which they had fought and risked their lives" (Gloster 102).

In addition, Harlem's rise in prominence dictated that it would become the hub for the resurgence by black artists. Harlem doubled in size between 1900 and 1920 and "acquired the character of a race capital. Negroes from Africa and the West Indies, from North and South, from all classes and backgrounds poured into the crucible of dark Manhattan" (Bone 54). Many black artists were drawn to Harlem since it was the headquarters for The Crisis and the NAACP, Opportunity and the National Urban League, and major publishers, both black and white. Harlem also piqued the curiosity of New York's white population, who enjoyed the "so-called primitivism of cabaret life" there (Gloster 113). This interest by whites translated into more opportunities for black novelists to acquire a

broader white readership and spawned more interest on the part of white publishers. Also making its headquarters in Harlem was the Garvey Movement, led by Marcus Garvey, whose program "stirred the imagination of the Negro masses as never before or since" (Bone 62). Though Garvey proved unsuccessful in leading African-Americans to a new civilization in Africa, Gloster credits Garvey's Back to Africa plan with instilling "the masses of his race with a passionate desire for the privileges of democracy" (104).

Unlike the African-American novels before World War I, the novels of the Harlem Renaissance and the Depression years are not so easily characterized. In fact, the only generally held views are that much more variety exists in subject matter and that the novels seem less interested in racial matters, probably because of the middle-class backgrounds of most of the novelists. Harold Cruse summarizes the Harlem Renaissance in two poignant words, "inspired aimlessness" (37). Because of this variety, instead of comparing the raceless novels of this study to those produced by the established mainstream group, it becomes necessary to consider several types of novels written during the 1920s and 1930s. Though most literary historians make no sustained attempt to classify the writings of the Harlem Renaissance, Hugh Gloster in Negro Voices in American Fiction (1948) offers categories of fiction that illustrate the diversity of subject matter

during this flourishing time period; he divides the writers' works into these classifications: Southern Realism, Color and Caste Among the Bourgeoisie, Propaganda, The Van Vechten Vogue (showing Harlem life as primitive), Harlem Realism, West Indian Realism, The Midwestern Small Town, Satire, Historical Fiction, Proletarian Fiction, and Folk Realism (xiii-xiv). As arbitrary as Gloster's classification is, it does illustrate the Harlem Renaissance's writers' wide variety of interests and further substantiates the difficulty in finding uniformity in their writings.

However diverse the writings of the Renaissance were, they collectively achieved more popular success than previous African-American writings. This increased popularity brought more attention to the role of the black artist. James Weldon Johnson's "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" (1928) examines "the problem of the double audience," which the African-American author must face (477). Unlike the white writer who targets only a white audience, the black writer must choose between the black audience and the white audience. To the critic who argues that the black writer should just write and not choose one audience over the other, Johnson counters, "It is doubtful if anything with meaning can be written unless the writer has some definite audience in mind" (477). Consequently, Johnson examines the results of an African-American

novelist's writing for a white audience, for a black audience, and for both a white and a black audience.

The choice of a white audience presents the problem of stereotypes and racial expectations, both positive and negative. Johnson believes that the white readership's positive expectations of African-Americans involve the following:

a simple, indolent, docile, improvident peasant;  
a singing, dancing, laughing, weeping child;  
picturesque beside his log cabin and in the  
snowy fields of cotton; naively charming with  
his banjo and his songs in the moonlight and  
along the lazy rivers; a faithful, ever-smiling  
and genuflecting old servitor to the white folks  
of quality; a pathetic and pitiable figure.

(478)

Johnson continues, juxtaposing the white readership's expectations of a bad black character:

he is an impulsive, irrational, passionate  
savage, reluctantly wearing a thin coat of  
culture, sullenly hating the white man's  
superiority; an everlastingly alien and  
irredeemable element in the nation; a menace to  
Southern civilization; a threat to Nordic race  
purity; a figure casting a sinister shadow  
across the country. (478)

As extreme as these two lists of characteristics are, Johnson laments that "ninety-nine one-hundredths of all that has been written about the Negro in the United States in three centuries . . . has been written in conformity to one or more of these ideas" (478). Expecting only black characters exhibiting characteristics chosen from one or both of these lists, the white readership would be slow to accept any deviation in characterization. Johnson realizes especially that "it would be straining the credulity of white America beyond the breaking point for a Negro writer to put out a novel dealing with the wealthy class of colored people" (479).

With the white readership's expectations so rigidly entrenched, the African-American writer would seemingly have a better chance targeting a black audience, but Johnson adds that the black writer "has no more absolute freedom to speak as he pleases addressing black America than he has in addressing white America" (480). The black readership expects that only the African-American's best points should be portrayed. As an illustration, Johnson argues that an all-black audience would thoroughly enjoy black performers ridiculing weaknesses of the black race but that the same black audience would react quite differently if any white patrons viewed the same performance with them (480). Given these two very different sets of expectations for the white and black

reading public, the African-American writer should, according to Johnson, "fashion something that rises above race, and reaches out to the universal in truth and beauty" (481). Johnson's view in 1928, of course, anticipates the raceless novels that would later appear in the 1930s.

Under ordinary conditions, a black writer's choice of audience affected his ability to be published by white publishers, but the Stock Market Crash in 1929 and the subsequent Depression of the early 1930s made his choice of subject matter even more important. Cary Wintz, in Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance, notes the difficulties that African-American writers faced during the Depression years. Regardless of their income in the 1920s, "black writers faced more difficult times in the 1930s," partially because the patrons who often supported them were less able to do so during the economic crisis (220). Though some African-American writers did receive support from the Federal Writers Project as a result of the New Deal, most African-American writers became increasingly aware of the importance of writing fiction acceptable to a white publisher and white reading public. Certainly, these economic factors must have affected the decisions concerning content made by writers of raceless fiction.

Most literary historians omit the terms "raceless,"

"raceless novel," and "raceless fiction" from their chronological surveys of the literature of the 1930s. A survey of the African-American fiction between 1930 and 1940, however, does yield six novels appropriate for study as raceless fiction. The subsequent chapters of this dissertation will explore the following about the six novels: the apparent freedom of the characters from significant white oppression, the absence of propaganda dealing with racial issues, the attitudes of particular novelists toward raceless novels (through prefaces, journals, and letters, when available), and the critics' responses to the novels and writers.

Chapter 2 explores the raceless novels that focus primarily on the lower class. Arna Bontemps's God Sends Sunday (1931) deals exclusively with the rise and fall of Lil Augie, a jockey. Likewise, George Wylie Henderson covers the life of the sharecropper Ollie Miss in his novel of the same name (1935). These two novels were the first for both Bontemps and Henderson, and though they were less than popular works with the reading public, they, nevertheless, illustrate the writers' attempts to generate a white readership during the Depression years.

The middle class serves as the focus of the raceless novels in Chapter 3. Countee Cullen's One Way to Heaven (1932) and Jessie Fauset's The Chinaberry Tree (1931) examine the wealth, education, and social standing of the

African-American residents of Harlem and of Red Brook, New Jersey, respectively. Cullen's and Fauset's look at the middle class illustrates a radical departure from the content of most African-American fiction of the 1930s. Reared in the middle class themselves, both writers hoped to convince readers of the similarities between the black and white middle classes.

Chapter 4 explores the philosophy and writings of Zora Neale Hurston, the controversial folklorist whose emphasis on folklore instead of racial issues angered militant African-American writers. Her Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934) and Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), both set in her own rural South, illustrate her training as a folklorist and her strong desire to avoid writing about racial issues.

This study of the raceless novel will conclude with a look at the decline of the raceless novels and their authors as they moved into the 1940s. In every case, the African-American writers of the raceless novels of the 1930s stopped writing this type of fiction and either chose another genre or ceased writing altogether, partially because Richard Wright and his message of protest dominated the fiction of the 1940s. Wright's Native Son forever changed African-American fiction, and Wright's popular message spawned the Wright School, which firmly established the militant message for years to come.

## Chapter 2

### Raceless Novels of the Lower Class: Henderson's Ollie Miss and Bontemps's God Sends Sunday

Unlike James Weldon Johnson's look at a middle-class, cultured man of the world in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, George Wylie Henderson's Ollie Miss (1935) and Arna Bontemps's God Sends Sunday (1931) provide the reader with a look at African-American life lived by the lower class of society outside of Harlem. The first novel chronicles the life of the protagonist Ollie Miss, a female fieldhand on an Alabama farm. God Sends Sunday features the financial rise and fall of Lil Augie, a successful jockey of the 1890s who struggles constantly with feelings of inferiority because of his small stature (Jones 15). One possible reason for choosing a setting outside of Harlem is that both novels were written after the Stock Market Crash, which signaled an end to an interest in Harlem (Gloster 208-09).

Though the lower-class lives of these two protagonists seemingly could have provided both Henderson and Bontemps the opportunity to write treatises on social injustices, both writers refrain and write novels almost devoid of white characters and of social commentary, thus taking the term "raceless" to an extreme. Focusing solely on the

characterization of the two lower-class black characters, Ollie Miss and Lil Augie, the novels stress the laughter, singing, and good times enjoyed, not the characters' position in the lower economic class.

Though neither author offers any published comment on his novel's raceless qualities, both were certainly well aware of the economy of the day, which was clearly not favorable for black writers. Since both Henderson and Bontemps were attempting to publish their first novels, one consideration may have been that they did not want to dissuade either a white publisher or a predominantly white reading public from accepting their initial works. Writing about familiar stereotypical lower-class African-American characters allowed Henderson and Bontemps to secure the publication of their first novels. Avoiding the less popular urban setting, both writers placed their characters in the South and employed many of the pastoral stereotypes described by Johnson in "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" (478). Also, in their move to the South, they did not forget the Harlem Renaissance's emphasis on the primitive, leading Blyden Jackson and Robert Bone, respectively, to describe both novels as products of the Renaissance (vii, 120). Both Ollie Miss and God Sends Sunday, almost completely devoid of propaganda and white characters, focus on the pastoral and primitive elements of rural African-American life in the South, stereotypes for a white reading

public.

In Ollie Miss, Henderson juxtaposes the strong, very independent Ollie with her effete former lover, Jule. Because he left her for another woman, the eighteen-year-old Ollie leaves their cabin and goes to Uncle Alex's farm, looking for work. Uncle Alex, as he is called by almost everyone, and his wife Caroline offer Ollie work as a farmhand on their Alabama farm though they know little about her. Henderson encourages the historical stereotypic view of the loyal, compliant black farm worker. He does this by adding the "Uncle" before Alex's name and by describing Ollie's reaction to him: "And her heart went out to Alex, beseeching of his friendship, his fatherly protection, and offering the simple devotion of her own loyalty in return" (23). Everyone seems to have his own theory of where Ollie came from, but she neither confirms nor denies any of these rumors. Ollie's independence in finding a job is only the first of many examples of her strength. When she first arrives, she insists on carrying her own bags. Alex's wife, Caroline, marvels at the amount of food Ollie eats, and Ollie retorts, "But I kin do a lot of work in de field. Evahbody sey dat I is de best hand dey evah had" (21). She, in fact, confirms her abilities while plowing with Slaughter, Shell, and Willie, hired hands who work for Alex. Only Slaughter is able to keep up with Ollie's brisk pace as she "plowed serenely on, as

though it were just another day" (43). By her third week on the farm, Ollie settles "into the leisurely routine of hoeing and plowing" and is described as "born to work" (111).

To further emphasize Ollie's strength, Henderson often compares her behavior to that of a man. The fieldhands are especially surprised to hear her reaction to Willie's apology for cursing while being dragged by a steer through the field. Seeing no need for the apology, Ollie remarks to Willie, "Tain't no need to 'pologize. A li'l cussin' ain't nuthin' nohow, an' cussin' in front of 'omans is de same to me as cussin' in front of mens. Cussin' is jes cussin'--dat's all" (47). Her unexpected reaction, uncharacteristic for a woman of this time period, causes Shell to ask, "Well, whut kind of 'oman is dat?" (48). She further illustrates masculine qualities and feelings of equality with men when, while plowing the field, she whistles "with the skill and feeling of a man" (64). Her most daring behavior, however, comes when she brazenly, and in front of the older women, skillfully rolls and smokes a cigarette.

Beneath all this apparent strength and independence is one dominant emotion: love for her former lover Jule. Though she will plow with other men, she will not socialize with them. From the moment she arrives on the farm, Slaughter, one of the hired men, is enamored of her, but

Ollie refuses his help with her luggage and refuses his offers of going to church and to a party with him. When Ollie goes alone to Lucy West's party, she has men around her wanting to light her cigarette and dance with her, but she dances with Willie and only Willie the entire evening. As he walks her to her cabin after the party, Ollie invites Willie to smoke with her. Her attraction to him, she reveals, comes because he reminds her of Jule: "Watching the lines of his body, the set of his flanks and shoulders, Ollie suddenly thought of Jule" (98). Though completely innocent of any wrongdoing, Ollie and Willie are the subject of gossip in the days to come, especially since they are observed laughing together. Perhaps still substituting the available Willie for the unavailable Jule, Ollie, for the first time, allows a man to take her mule to its stall and feed it instead of taking it there herself. So radical a change in Ollie's behavior does not go unnoticed by the other workers on the farm.

Though Henderson's emphasis is on Ollie, he reveals much in the novel about the life of the field worker as well. Had he wanted to emphasize race or politics, he could have focused on the hardships endured by the workers: their ceaseless toiling in the field, poor working conditions, cramped living quarters, or little hope for the future. However, Henderson develops none of these negative features, causing Hugh Gloster to note that "the story is

too much dissociated from the grim realities of Southern life" in the 1930s (238). Jackson, while noting that "there is no storm and fury of protest in Ollie Miss," comments on Henderson's covert racial message: "The racism endemic to the world of which Ollie Miss clearly is a minted miniature speaks for itself and Ollie Miss requires no Zolaesque maneuvers to conflate its art with pleas for social justice" (xviii).

Though the field work in Ollie Miss goes on from sunrise to sunset, it is accompanied by laughter. When the steer that Willie is plowing with proves too intractable, breaks into a gallop, and plows up some of the cotton, "Slaughter and Shell laughed heartily and offered a few jokes at Willie's expense" (41). Besides using laughter to minimize the difficulty of the field work, Henderson utilizes singing and whistling to suggest that difficult work is almost enjoyable. To illustrate the pleasure the fieldhands derive from their hard work, he stresses their reactions to each stage of the growing season. In June, "from dawn to dusk, man and beast had to sweat, plowing and hoeing"; the workers' rest comes on Saturday and Sunday when they go to ball games, picnics, and church (109). Again, stressing the workers' leisure activities, Henderson writes that "late July days were long and lazy" (110). The last stage of the growing season, harvest, becomes not a time of backbreaking labor, but one of rejoicing over the

bountiful harvest:

The harvest was ripe and mellow. It was as if the fierce heat of Summer, when green things fought to live and grow, had suddenly cooled with the spent warmth of its own passion. And brown hands and bent bodies went about plucking the fruits thereof with a merry content. They gathered and filled their storehouses and cribs, and considered the fruits of their labor as blessings. They prayed not with sadness, but gave thanks with joy. A prayer was a song; a sigh was a curse. So they picked cotton and sang. They pulled fodder and let out whoops and field cries. What was work and sweat when you could sing--and singing, your soul, your very being, ceased to live and began to soar?

(110-11)

Such language demonstrates the pastoral elements that appear throughout the novel. Emmanuel Nelson, calling Ollie Miss a "work of pastoral elegance," feels that it "captures the rhythms and nuances of black speech with remarkable precision" (97). Bone, also recognizing the pastoral qualities, adds, "The linguistic texture of the novel reflects its peasant setting; figures of speech are based on nature imagery and barnyard metaphor" (124). As beautiful as the setting and language are, they,

nevertheless, reinforce Johnson's description of the white stereotype of black farm workers nestled in their quaint cabins in the midst of the cotton fields.

When the plowing and harvesting are done for the day, week, or season, the workers turn to social and spiritual activities. The previously mentioned dance at Lucy West's, the ball games, and the church services provide respite from field labor. One of the yearly highlights for the workers comes in late September when the camp meeting begins. News of it spreads throughout surrounding counties, bringing together a large crowd of people who have not seen each other in a year. Henderson devotes an entire chapter of Ollie Miss to the activities and personalities involved in this series of yearly revivals. Eventually, everyone goes into the church building for a service, but Henderson focuses on the socializing each evening before the service begins. The grove surrounding the church becomes alive with music, laughter, and food:

People milled around Uncle Alex's stand, nudging and inching their way to the narrow wooden counter. Once there, they took a glass of lemonade in one hand and a barbecue sandwich in the other, dropped two nickels or a ten-cent piece, then backed away to eat and drink in loud, laughing groups. (170)

The carnival atmosphere of visiting and eating continues

until time for the service to begin. Then, the church marshal, carrying a buggy whip, roams through the trees to make sure that the socializing will end when the church service begins. Clearly, Henderson's laborers seem to enjoy life free from racial oppression, both during their work hours and their leisure time.

Besides showing the black fieldhands having a good time, Henderson further indicates their lack of consciousness of any oppression by allowing only a minimal number of white characters to appear in the novel. Their roles are so limited that the few critics who have written about Ollie Miss cannot agree on the actual number of white characters in the novel. Nelson believes that there is only one white character and that he does not speak (97). In the introduction to Ollie Miss, Jackson states that only the sheriff and the doctor are white (xvii). Gloster agrees that the sheriff is white, but he says that a store proprietor is the only other white character (237-38). Noel Schraufnagel refers only to "the absence of white people" which "allows Henderson to concentrate on Ollie Miss" (16). This lack of agreement by critics does confirm that race is not an issue in this novel. Henderson himself offers few clues about which characters are white; in fact, the only clues are the characters' speech and their social positions. Because the black characters speak most often in dialect, the absence of such speech probably indicates

that the characters not using dialect are white. Another supposition is that the sheriff, doctor, and store proprietor are white simply because of their position in this small rural Alabama town.

Regardless of their color, these three characters serve little function in the novel. The sheriff's brief appearance results from Ollie's being cut with a razor by Lena, Jule's current girl. The sheriff asks only four brief questions of Ollie during the entire interview. The doctor's role is to stop Ollie's bleeding by administering forty stitches and to see her three other times, twice in her cabin and once in his office. The only negative comment made about him is a reference to his high fee (243-44). The most fully characterized of the three white characters is Mack MacLeod, proprietor of MacLeod's Feed and Supply Store. Uncle Alex has known him for forty years and once served as his overseer. While in town taking Ollie to the doctor, Alex visits MacLeod and has a drink with him. MacLeod's purpose in the novel remains unclear. He does exemplify good relations between a black man and a white man, though he warns Alex not to be "slopping around with a fool nigger" in reference to Alex's bringing Ollie to town on such a wet day (252). Likewise, the novel's racelessness extends past the three white characters to the lack of conversation about whites; nowhere in the novel does Henderson allow his black characters to even mention

white people at all.

Since race is not an element providing conflict in Ollie Miss, Henderson turns to conflicts among black women. Gloster comments, "The chief discordant influences are the prying meddlesomeness of impertinent gossips and the spirited fights of jealous lovers" (238). Fitting nicely into Gloster's category of "impertinent gossips" is Nan, who lives on the same property as Ollie and who tries to cause as much trouble for her as possible. Nan berates Ollie's manners at meals, her smoking cigarettes like a man, and her dancing with Willie. Perhaps it is because Nan's husband left her that she is jealous of the attention Ollie draws from the men. Whatever her motive, she often tells Uncle Alex and Caroline that Ollie "ain't fit" to live on the place with them (112). Attempting to get the complete story about what happened after Willie walked Ollie home after the dance, Nan first questions Willie and then Slaughter and Shell. Both then and when she observes the wounded Ollie with her forty stitches, Nan is described as having "cat's eyes" (125, 228). Her antagonism to Ollie proves that Henderson's protagonist does not care about gossip and that Ollie will not be intimidated by another woman. Also, Henderson uses Nan as his first example of a woman who is not able to behave normally after the loss of the man she loves.

When Ollie attempts to visit her former lover Jule,

she encounters a second adversarial female, Della, who had earlier furnished Jule a cabin in which to live. When Ollie goes there, she does not see Jule, but she does find a slender slip lying across his bed. Ollie knows that the slip is too small to belong to Della; however, she goes to Della's house anyway in hope of finding Jule. Della says that after Ollie moved out, Jule stopped coming to her house. Ollie waits there for a week, even though Della tells Ollie that Jule has gone to Roba, where he has a new girl. Every night they sit in the doorway, "talking and looking down the trail toward the swamp, each hoping in her own way that Jule would come" (146). Later in the novel, when Ollie does finally see Jule, he tells her that Della was found dead. Ollie quickly responds, "You--you done killed Della, Jule. I--I don't means you killed her wid yo' hands or nuthin' like dat. I--I means Della couldn't live widout you, Jule. She wanted you. Wanted you jes--jest like I wanted you" (191). Henderson never discloses the real reason for Della's death, but he implies that she dies of a broken heart. Ollie adds, "Only she couldn't want you an'--an' keep on livin' an' not hab you, like I could" (191-92).

Besides Nan and Della, Lena serves as a counter to Ollie. Ollie's previously mentioned injuries come at the hand of Lena, Jule's current lover, who has come to find Jule after he spends a night with Ollie. Never backing

down from Lena, Ollie admits that Jule did stay the night with her. During this confrontation, Jule even tries to swing Ollie around and out of Lena's way, but Ollie directs her remarks directly to the girl, who subsequently produces a razor and slices her. Despite her pain, Ollie empathizes with Lena's feelings toward Jule, and when given the chance to identify positively Lena as her attacker, she simply says, "Ef she de one whut cut me, I guess she done hit because she figger she was doin' whut was right. An' I guess ef I had been her, I'd hab cut her jes lak she cut me. Hit was me or her--an' hit jes happened to be me!" (270). Like Lena, Ollie would have been willing to cut or kill in order to keep Jule.

Ironically, the reader finds that Jule is not at all worth the trouble he has caused Della, Lena, and Ollie. Henderson's portrayal of him serves to make Ollie appear even stronger. Convinced of Ollie's strength, independence, and faithfulness to Jule, the reader finds Jule inept in any kind of crisis and unfaithful to Ollie. When Lena cuts her, Jule picks Ollie up "in his arms, turning around in circles, as though he didn't know where to go or what to do" (220). Shortly thereafter, Jule returns to see Ollie just as she comes back from her visit to the doctor. When she almost faints on Jule, Alex has to help Ollie to her bed while Jule "stood there in the middle of the floor, his arms hanging limply at his sides, as

though he were lost" (261). In contrast to Jule, Ollie becomes more forceful and exerts her independence near the end of the novel. Although she knows that she might be pregnant with Jule's baby, Ollie spurns his proposal of marriage, opting instead to rear the baby alone on the ten acres that Alex has promised that she can rent next year as a sharecropper. No longer dependent on Jule, she can exhibit her self-sufficient spirit on her own plot of land, which makes her "feel happy in a way she had never felt before" (276).

With its complete exclusion of racial tension and propaganda, Ollie Miss reflects characteristics of the raceless novel. The novel's few white characters all function in minor roles and serve to help, not harm, the black farm workers, in whom Henderson is so very interested. Though he attempts to keep racial issues completely out of his novel, Jackson detects a superiority in Henderson's white characters:

their behavior and the deference with which they are received when they descend from their white world into the black world of Ollie Miss plainly indicate that one world has been compressed into a separate entity and victimized by the other.

(xvii)

Still, Nelson asserts that Henderson "is interested primarily in interpreting black culture, not in demanding

racial equality and social justice" (97). Henderson's focus, then, is on Ollie Miss, not a black agricultural laborer undergoing oppressive economic treatment, but a sharecropper who, after learning a great deal about love and about herself, finds enjoyment and self-sufficiency on her own ten acres in rural Alabama, a perfect ending for a pastoral novel.

Just as Henderson's Ollie Miss focuses on only one major lower-class black character, so also does Arna Bontemps's God Sends Sunday. In Ollie Miss, the focal character is the first female sharecropper in African-American fiction; in God Sends Sunday, that character is the first jockey in African-American fiction. While Henderson examines the pastoral elements of the rural South, Bontemps uses the primitive elements found in the fast life of horseracing. Though Augie's small stature enables him to become one of the most famous jockeys in America, his lack of size also puts him on the defensive with those around him. Helping him overcome his feelings of inferiority because of his size is his tenaciously held belief that he was born with good luck. Despite the circumstances around him, he always feels that what he lacks in size is more than compensated in luck.

During Augie's early years, he lives on the Red River Plantation in Louisiana with his sister Leah. His mother is dead. Described as "too thin for hard labor" and as an

"undersized boy, smaller for his years than any other child on the place," he is relegated to the pasture watching cows and not required to work in cotton or the rice swamp (3). His lack of size and his limited responsibilities isolate him from the other children, and he feels inferior and begins to stutter. Augie begins to spend more time with the plantation's horses because "he did not feel timid when he was riding or managing a fine horse; he felt big" (4). Besides horses, Augie likes river boats, so one day he jumps aboard the P. T. Blain bound for New Orleans, where he becomes a jockey and learns to play the accordion. Augie's control over horses gives him a power which "due to his inferior size and strength, he had never experienced with people" (20). Similarly, gambling makes Augie feel like a big man, which is obviously his desired goal. Beginning with his first crap game, he wins almost everything, and he attributes his good fortune to being born "with a caul over his face" (10). This veil, he believes, was a sign from birth that he would always be lucky. Furthermore, as a child, he once saw a "jack-ma-lantern" in the woods (10). This unnatural light normally leads its victims to their destruction, but Augie saw the light and lived. The caul and the jack-ma-lantern have convinced him that he is lucky, so he is not very surprised to win at gambling and to win his first horse race in New Orleans.

As a result, Augie's confidence grows, and he changes noticeably. His success is accompanied by a "superior air" and cigars instead of plug tobacco (20). Ostentatious with his newly acquired funds, Augie proclaims, "I'm jes' dirty wid money. I got greenbacks on me worser 'n a dog got fleas" (22). Besides learning to drink, curse, and gamble, Augie becomes interested in women, though his size remains a problem in all human relationships. Augie's first sexual encounter with a woman occurs with a "big yellow woman named Parthenia" (23). While with her, he buys a bottle of whiskey, throws his change in the trash, and brags about his money. Before leaving her, he blackens both her eyes and leaves "feeling like a giant" although he is only half her size (24). Throughout the novel, Bontemps casts Augie's behavior and emotions in light of his size. As his status rises, Augie notices that his clothes and appearance are not in keeping with his position. To that end, he buys very expensive, gaudy clothes and has his eyeteeth pulled out and replaced with gold ones. Such an operation "was extremely painful, as every one knew," and the purpose is probably to dispel any "lingering questions about Little Augie's real manhood" (25). Yet size still plagues Augie when he visits his sister Leah after an absence of several years. She believes that he has not grown an inch since he left the plantation, and she exclaims to her children, "That's yo Uncle Augie out there on de street. That lil

bitta man in de fine clo'es" (47).

Besides improving his appearance, Augie becomes very interested in improving his acquaintances, especially his female acquaintances. Declaring that "no black women were for him" because they are "onlucky" and "evil," he seeks women of a lighter hue (26). As a result, he meets Florence, an attractive yellow girl, at a church picnic, and he is impressed by her. Complicating matters for Augie are two very dangerous men, Joe Baily and Tom Wright, who also have their sights set on Florence. They follow Florence and her friends to a fresh-water spring, where Baily pushes Wright into the water. Wet and embarrassed, Wright pulls out a gun, Baily pulls out a gun, and the two shoot each other in front of the horrified crowd. In Augie's eyes, such a confrontation raises his estimation of Florence appreciably, and he rides home with her in the carriage. He believes that she is his girl until he hears a friend call her a "white man's strumpet" (34). Upon further investigation, Augie finds that Florence is dating his own white boss, Horace Church-Woodbine. Other than some white carnival workers who are barely mentioned later in the novel, he is one of only two white characters included in the novel. Bontemps characterizes Woodbine as "an irresponsible banjo player, the scion of a wealthy family of horse-fanciers," "loud-mouthed, slightly alcoholic, and good to his niggers" (16). When Augie first

arrives at the stable, Woodbine has Augie dance and sing for him, an incident Bontemps perhaps includes to make Augie conform to the stereotype held by white readers. Nothing else about Woodbine appears except for Augie's reaction to him after seeing Florence fall into his arms. Taking no action whatsoever, Augie feels discouragement but "no resentment, no bitterness" (36). Characteristically, though he gets the blues, he reminds himself that he was born lucky and that his luck has not changed.

Unable to possess Florence or to find another suitable girl in New Orleans, Augie begins to look forward to his upcoming racing trip to St. Louis. While there, he walks down Targee Street, where "the painted brown girls were partial to jockeys" (53). He meets Della Green and begins "to feel once more like a big man who could manage women in his own way" though his small size is accentuated by "a ridiculous oversized nightshirt" that he is wearing (56, 57). Augie's chief rival for Della's attention is Biglow Brown, described as a "magnificent ginger-colored giant" (60). When Augie arrogantly tells Della what he plans to do to Brown for blackening her eyes, even she belittles his "mighty proud talk for such a lil man" (64). Augie later tells Della that only he would ever beat her in the future, but when Brown beats Della in the house that Augie has furnished for her, Augie cannot endure it; in fact, if Brown "had been intimate with her in some other way, it

would not have been as bad" (85). Overcome with anger, Augie stalks and kills Biglow Brown, but he is out of jail in time for Brown's funeral. In a subtle attack on the justice system, Bontemps writes:

In those days red-light murders were so commonplace they evoked but slight interest from the court authorities. Condemnations were rare. Almost anything passes for self-defense. Consequently the impression got about that the state did not wish to bother with crimes committed by Negroes against Negroes. (87)

Realizing that Della will never be a Florence because she is not proud enough, Augie prepares to go back to New Orleans, but before he goes, he hits Della on both cheeks and proclaims, "Lil Augie is big enough to do his manly duties" (95). Sadly, hitting her seems to be his only way of exerting his masculinity.

Bontemps does not have many white characters in God Sends Sunday, but he does include several comments about the actions of white people. Besides the statement about the courts not being interested in crimes committed by blacks against blacks, Bontemps includes another negative statement about white people when Augie moves in with Florence after he returns to New Orleans. He hears that Gummy, the saloon keeper and the only other white character besides Woodbine in the novel, has been dating Florence.

Coincidentally, Gummy and some of Florence's white neighbors quickly form a "charge of immorality" as soon as they hear that Augie has moved in because "Florence had been too frankly a white man's girl" (102). Interestingly, Bontemps never states whether this charge is an actual law or just the white system manipulating a black couple, but through his reticence, he implies the latter.

The only other conversations about white people in the novel all occur in a barber shop in New Orleans. To achieve humor, Bontemps gives two of the statements about white people to Barney Jones, described as a "lazy young black, notorious for absurd fabrications" and as "the city Negro's idea of a hayseed" (31, 32). No one seems to take Barney very seriously, especially when he drawls, "Them six-shooters won't kill white folks" (32). His other story, even more incredulous, amuses Augie and the other patrons of the barber shop:

You can't help whut de white folks does to you. They is got things putty much they own way now. Out in Texas I seen a big black nigger hitched to a buggy lak a hoss. He was tied up beside de hitchin'-bar, drinkin' outa de tub. Directly a white lady come out o' de sto', got in de seat, an' switched his behin' wid a lil hoss whup, an' off he went trottin' down de street. (34)

Bontemps's chief purpose with Barney is to show the

contrast between city African-Americans and country African-Americans, according to Augie's perception of them. Inserted between Barney's two anecdotes, though, is a much more serious indictment of white people. Mississippi, a hack-driver who is commenting on the two black men who killed each other over Florence, says, "Niggers is crazy to shoot up one anuther dat-a-way. Dat's jes' whut white folks likes to see. Meantime they is doin'-up niggers right an' lef' an' nobody says boo" (33). Even stranger than its placement between two humorous comments is the fact that such a statement goes almost unnoticed by the barber shop crowd. The only verbal reaction to the indictment is Augie's effective remark, "That's sumpin whut you can't help" (34).

Bontemps's few inclusions of such material never really border on propaganda, a fact noted by Gwendolyn Bennett in her review of God Sends Sunday:

I am happy that not even the most belligerent reader will be able to accuse this Negro writer of propaganda. There is no slightest hint of the race problem between its covers. Mr. Bontemps piles on color, not in order to make a brief for his people, but rather to make a portrait of them. (16)

The portrait that Bontemps creates throughout the novel is one of Augie's attraction to glamour, wealth, and

happiness, making the reader frequently forget that this is a novel of the poorest class. Socially, Augie and his acquaintances are mostly of the lower class, but their dress, actions, and money reflect prosperity, at least in the first half of the novel. These are not degraded or victimized people; these are people who enjoy life. When Augie returns to New Orleans, "things were sparkling for the Negroes," and "everybody had money; everybody was nigger-rich" (96). To further enhance Augie's position in this affluent group, Bontemps reveals that he "could buy and sell the other blacks by the dozen" (96). But not all of the characters are prosperous. When Augie visits Leah, he sees small houses, perspiring faces, and idleness, yet he observes that "there was laughter none the less, loud-mouthed nigger laughter, and songs in the miserable stone houses" (47).

Hoping to show lower-class blacks having an enjoyable time at an annual picnic and dance, Bontemps records a humorous scene by singling out a heavy mulattress, complete with her conversation and difficulty in maneuvering around even with the assistance of her "puny-looking boy, half her size and dull black" (150). Bontemps mentions the comically incongruous pair on three occasions: once when the freely perspiring girl first appears, a second time when her dancing results in "a thump like dead weight" on the floor with three men needed to help her regain her

feet, and the third time when the couple merrily leaves together (159). Such a comic passage is one of many which portray the pleasure enjoyed by Bontemps's black characters. Laurence Stallings, in his 1931 New York Sun review of God Sends Sunday, notes: "It is without any resentment of color distinctions, being unique in that the disadvantages of being black in this country are not lamented. I cannot detect in any sentence either irony or pity" (qtd. in Gloster 173).

The success and happiness enjoyed by the other black characters are in direct contrast, however, with Augie's fall from prosperity, but the reader understands that the jockey himself brings about his fall. After enduring "bad luck" both in horse racing and gambling, he tells Florence to bet everything he has on his upcoming race. This poor decision results in the loss of his money, Florence, and everything else he has except for his once-dashing Prince Albert coat.

After hitchhiking off and on for twelve years, he reaches California, where he locates Leah's house in Mudtown, an African-American suburb of Watts. Though Augie believes his luck will appear again at any given moment, Bontemps stresses the age and smallness of the once-famous jockey. His eyesight is failing him, and the clothes that Leah gives him are far too big. Gone too is any fame that he once knew. When he meets Lissus, Leah's neighbor, Augie

introduces himself as "Lil Augie whut you reads about! There ain't but de one," but Lissus responds, "I ain't read 'bout no Lil Augie" (163). Nevertheless, Augie retains his arrogance and even wants to fight other men at times, but Bontemps betrays to the reader Augie's true self: "A hopeless old wreck, Augie still had dreams of heroism too big for his body. In his drunkenness the sizes of things became temporarily adjusted" (179). Augie's only temporary reprieve is when he dreams of taking Leah's old bony horse to be serviced so that they can breed a race horse. Finally, after an altercation with Lissus over a woman, Augie kills him with a beet knife and flees for his life. Pursued by Tisha, Lissus's wife, he drops his suitcase, saving nothing but his accordion. Devastated over the loss of his possessions and humiliated at running from a woman, he laments, "I ain't nobody. I ain't nuthin'. I's jes a po' picked sparrow. I ain't big as a dime, an' I don't worth a nickel" (197). Bontemps closes the story of Lil Augie as he travels toward Tiajuana, where he hears there are horse racing and plenty of liquor.

With Lil Augie, Bontemps created "a new character and a new milieu, both colorful, and both authentic parts to fill out the saga of Negro life" (Sterling Brown 172). Bontemps's use of characters that "had much of the primitive-exotic about them" (Young 224) illustrates his desire to create a work of popular fiction that would be

published and read by a predominantly white culture. James Young adds that black critics "attacked" the "low life" elements of the novel (135), but the gambling, dancing, drinking, and accordion-playing Lil Augie prompted one white New York Times reviewer to praise the novel's "pagan color" ("A Negro Jockey" 7).

Both Ollie Miss and God Sends Sunday describe thoroughly the life of one featured lower-class black character, but race is not much of an issue in either novel, indicating Henderson's and Bontemps's desire to satisfy their white publishers and audience. The few white characters and statements about white people never dominate either novel, and Ollie and Augie are apparently free to lead their lives as they wish. Moreover, the fieldhands and jockeys with whom they associate enjoy some measure of happiness despite their working and living conditions. These factors result in both novels' easy placement into the category of raceless novels. Henderson and Bontemps focused solely on their protagonists. Margaret Perry believes that God Sends Sunday "succeeded better than many of the other novels by black writers because Bontemps concentrated on the chronicle of his hero and used racial and folkloric material only when it advanced his story" (104-05). Her evaluation could also apply to Ollie Miss as well. Art, not propaganda, was Henderson's and Bontemps's goal, and both novels successfully introduce the reader to

the lower-class lives of the sharecropper Ollie Miss and the jockey Lil Augie.

Unfortunately, neither novel sold well despite the writers' apparent care in appealing to a white readership. Nevertheless, Bontemps "liked the story [God Sends Sunday] well enough to collaborate with Countee Cullen" to produce a play based on it, St. Louis Woman (1939), which ran for 113 performances in 1946 (Jones 15). Perhaps it was because of the slow sales of their first novels or because of a more favorable time period several years later that neither Henderson nor Bontemps wrote another raceless novel. Ironically, both writers turned later to protest fiction, Henderson with Jule (1946) (Nelson 96) and Bontemps with Black Thunder (1936), which James Young calls "the first full-length novel to have black violence against white society as its major theme" (225).

### Chapter 3

#### Raceless Novels of the Middle Class: Cullen's One Way to Heaven and Fauset's The Chinaberry Tree

Life as lived by the African-American middle class dominates Countee Cullen's One Way to Heaven (1932) and Jessie Fauset's The Chinaberry Tree (1931). In One Way to Heaven, Cullen contrasts the stories of Sam Lucas, who makes his living going from town to town faking a conversion experience in black churches, and Constancia Brandon, the middle-class socialite employer of Lucas's wife, Mattie. Cullen explores the gullibility of the Harlem churches, as well as the middle-class pose of Constancia and her intellectual friends. Jessie Fauset's The Chinaberry Tree features Laurentine Strange and her cousin Melissa Paul, who search for respectability in the middle-class culture of Red Brook, New Jersey. For the African-American characters in both novels, middle-class life in Harlem and Red Brook exemplifies wealth, education, and social standing, elements notably absent from most of the novels of the Harlem Renaissance and the Depression Era.

Cullen and Fauset, who enjoyed leading such a middle-class life themselves, felt that as writers and leaders in the African-American community, they should focus on the

positive elements of black society. As fervent as their attempts to avoid racial issues were, however, an examination of their works reveals that they were not always able to stay within the raceless category. Instead, both novelists seem to satirize their African-American characters, especially their middle-class African-American characters. James Young, referring specifically to these two novels, asserts that Cullen satirizes the black middle class consciously while Fauset satirizes the black middle class unconsciously (207). Both writers unmask the pretensions of this class and expose its desire to pattern itself after the white middle class, undoubtedly the chief readers of these novels when they were originally published. Cullen's and Fauset's backgrounds, their philosophy about writing, and these two novels, One Way to Heaven and The Chinaberry Tree, provide insights into their mission to illustrate the similarities between the black and white middle classes in America.

Several similarities exist in the lives of these two writers. Each came from a family in which the father was a prominent minister: Cullen's adoptive father preached to Harlem's largest congregation at the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church (Shucard, "Countee Cullen" 36), while Fauset's father was the outspoken minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Camden County, New Jersey, a suburb of Philadelphia (Sylvander, "Jessie Redmon Fauset"

77). Also, both excelled in predominantly white high schools and colleges. Cullen attended DeWitt Clinton High School, the University Heights campus of New York University, and finally Harvard for an M. A. in English. Alan Shucard believes that Cullen's "education provided him firm intellectual footing in the white world" ("Countee Cullen" 37). Fauset's poor but cultured family sent her to the Philadelphia High School for Girls, where she was probably the only black student in the school (Sylvander, "Jessie Redmon Fauset" 77). Though she graduated with honors from high school, Bryn Mawr "avoided the issue of having to accept a black student by initiating support for her to receive a scholarship to Cornell University" (Sylvander, "Jessie Redmon Fauset" 77). Later, she did graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania. Outstanding students, both Cullen and Fauset were named to Phi Beta Kappa, Fauset "probably the first black woman to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa" (Sylvander, "Jessie Redmon Fauset" 77).

In addition, Cullen and Fauset championed the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance as writers and editors. Cullen in the 1920s was recognized as the chief African-American lyric poet while Fauset was the most prolific African-American novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, producing three novels besides The Chinaberry Tree between 1924 and 1933: There Is Confusion (1924), Plum Bun (1929), and

Comedy, American Style (1933) (Bone 101-02). As assistant editors in the 1920s, Cullen and Fauset guided Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life and the NAACP-sponsored The Crisis: a Record of the Darker Races, respectively (Shucard, "Countee Cullen, 39; Sylvander, "Jessie Redmon Fauset" 77).

Cullen's desire to portray appealing elements of African-American life and to create universal themes and characters caused controversy beginning in 1924 when he spoke of his role as a black poet: "If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be a POET and not NEGRO POET. . . . I shall not write of negro subjects for the purpose of propaganda. That is not what a poet is concerned with" (qtd. in Early 23). Cullen's assertion that he did not want to be a "NEGRO POET" ignited enormous controversy from the more militant camps, especially from Langston Hughes, who wrote "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain":

One of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." (692)

Hughes's statement, despite its lack of logic, exemplifies the criticism that Cullen faced because of his views.

A series entitled "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?", which ran in The Crisis in 1926 and 1927, presented the views of important publishers and writers, both black and white. When Cullen was interviewed for this publication, he offered his opinion of the most appropriate subject matter for African-American writers:

I do believe, however, that the Negro has not yet built up a large enough body of sound, healthy race literature to permit him to speculate in abortions and aberrations which other people are all too prone to accept as legitimate. (193)

Specifically referring to the role of the black writer, Cullen continued: "Negro artists have a definite duty to perform in this matter, one which should supersede their individual prerogatives, without denying those rights. We must create types that are truly representative of us as a people" (193). Cullen's definition of "types that are truly representative of us as a people" seems to refer to the middle-class societal standards to which he himself ascribed. He further develops this idea in his "Dark Tower" column in Opportunity in March 1928: "Negroes should be concerned with making good impressions. . . . Every phase of Negro life should not be the white man's concern" (90). "Making good impressions" again reflects Cullen's philosophy toward writing by American blacks, yet

he also expresses an interest in avoiding black stereotypes, such as the spiritual. In another "Dark Tower" column, dated June 1927, Cullen resents the tendency to limit the African-American to the performance of spirituals:

Without in the least depreciating the beauty of Negro spirituals or the undeniable fact that Negro singers do them, as it were, to the manner born, we have always resented the natural inclination of most white people to demand spirituals the moment it is known that a Negro is about to sing. So often the request has seemed to savor of the feeling that we could do this and this alone. (181)

Cullen did not always follow through on his desire to be "just a poet," but his philosophy that writers should not be limited to racial subjects and that the African-American's most positive attributes should be portrayed provided much food for thought during the Harlem Renaissance and the subsequent years.

Despite Cullen's words, he presents a somewhat different view of the American black culture in his only novel, One Way to Heaven. Interestingly enough, Cullen turned to the novel after having been one of the most talented black poets of the 1920s (Bone 78). Gerald Early believes that Cullen explored other genres besides poetry

in the 1930s because "he was no longer interested or could not write lyric poetry of the sort that made him famous, so he cast about for some other form" (57). His biographer Alan Shucard concurs:

One Way to Heaven came to represent to Cullen a possibility that he could regain the stature in the world of letters that he had enjoyed in the second half of the 1920s and that was now slipping away from as the Depression deepened and the energy of the Harlem Renaissance dissipated, as he turned toward teaching to make a living, perhaps as he sensed his poetic power failing to grow, or diminishing. (Countee Cullen 77)

Whatever Cullen's reason for writing his novel, he chose to ignore much of his advice to "Put your best foot forward" as a black writer ("Dark Tower" 90). Stephen Bronz notes that "though Cullen insisted that he wished to write about universal subjects instead of about Negroes, he found himself stressing racial themes" (16). In fact, he satirizes religious blacks, the black middle class, and white society in One Way to Heaven. Robert Bone argues that Cullen's "mischievous sense of humor and his penchant for satire differentiated him from those Renaissance novelists who were forever defending the race before the bar of white opinion" (78).

The plot of Cullen's novel involves two entirely different stories: the religious world of the lower class and the social world of the middle class. Unfortunately, the two very dissimilar stories rarely merge into a sustained novel, leaving readers to wonder why Cullen did not write two entirely separate books. Rudolph Fisher, also a writer of Harlem life, noted Cullen's problem in "exhibiting a lovely pastel and a cartoon on the same frame" (7). Shucard believes that the two different stories represent Cullen's desire to provide "two plots of class in Harlem" so that a distinct contrast and a complete picture of Harlem would emerge (Countee Cullen 74). Perhaps also the two different plots indicate Cullen's uncertainty as a beginning African-American novelist hoping to find and impress an audience during the Great Depression. Though Arthur Davis believes the novel "was designed to appeal primarily to a Negro audience," times were hard, and the readership was primarily white (81). Stephen Bronz recognizes Cullen's dilemma:

By 1932, judging from One Way to Heaven, Cullen was disillusioned, detached, and a little quizzical towards the Harlem Renaissance. Here he was breaking his own dictum that Negro writers should present only the appealing sides of Negro life to the white public. (64)

In his sections of the novel dealing with the

religious world of the lower class, Cullen features the exploits of Sam Lucas, a one-armed ne'er-do-well who goes from state to state faking a religious conversion in African-American churches, "just the sort of ne'er do well Cullen himself had warned Negroes not to write about" (Bronz 62). Sam comes to Harlem, where he notes that the "colored people looked happy" though not as hospitable as those he had encountered in the South (351). Arriving at the largest Negro church in New York City just in time for the New Year's Eve service, Sam notes, "My people sure are rising" (352). When Reverend Johnson concludes his sermon and invites people to come forward, Sam, who has "performed" for eight years in twelve states, goes forward and throws down a pack of playing cards and a sharp razor, trappings of the life he pretends to be renouncing. At the same time, Mattie Johnson, a girl whom Reverend Johnson had earlier singled out and tried to shame into coming forward, makes her way down the aisle along with eight other people--all because they felt in Sam "the very devil had been laid low before them" (364).

Completely duped by Sam's apparent religious zeal, the congregation rallies around him, believing "he was mystery and miracle and the confirmation of faith to them" and contributing over twenty dollars to the new convert (366). Sam enjoys the attention and the money, musing to himself that "he had never joined church yet but it had

led to an affair" (367). Reverend Johnson, unlike the congregation, recognizes Sam from a revival four years before in Memphis. Johnson must now decide whether to expose Sam as a fraud and risk losing the nine new souls or to remain silent about Sam's hoax. Feeling that he is compromising the truth but knowing that souls are at stake, Johnson says nothing. Mattie later marries Sam, primarily because of his conversion experience, which she frequently wants to discuss. She regards the playing cards and razor as religious icons, which caused her conversion; she tells Sam: "But when you stepped up, so firm-like and decided, and threw those cards and that razor, I felt something like fire run from the cards and the razor straight into me and burn my sins away" (377-78). Sam, an unfaithful husband, never becomes religious at all but does nothing to destroy Mattie's sacred view of his conversion experience. Even as he is dying from pneumonia and pleurisy, Sam creates one last trick: he pretends to hear music and to see lights, signs which he had heard Mattie discussing as proof that the almost deceased individual would be entering heaven. Despite Sam's dishonesty and indolence, Cullen portrays him sympathetically while, at the same time, gently satirizing the gullible religious establishment around him (Shucard, Countee Cullen 78-79).

Cullen also presents Aunt Mandy, Mattie's aunt, in a

satirical way. Though she faithfully attends the church and its auxiliary meetings, she maintains the need for superstition in her life. Cullen writes, "There was much that was pagan and occult in her" (384). Though she trusts God, she also reads tea leaves and coffee dregs and consults her cards almost daily. When Mandy learns that Sam has left Mattie for another woman, she tells Mattie about the recipe for a cake that, when consumed, "would turn wayward feet from any wandering road back to the ways of home" (515). Seeing her aunt's reliance on superstition, Mattie visits Madam Samantha, who engages in a seance and offers Mattie holy water, both meant to bring Sam back to her.

Though Sam, Mattie, and Aunt Mandy are of the lower class, "Cullen does not dwell on the indignities perpetrated by the American color line or on the miseries of poor blacks" (Singh 81). While writing about this class of people that he claimed to shun the most in his writings, Cullen never allows his story to become a treatise on their woes or economic situation, illustrating once again his philosophy: "I shall not write of negro subjects for the purpose of propaganda" (qtd. in Early 23).

In One Way to Heaven, Cullen saves his most interesting characters and conscious satire for Constancia Brandon and the black middle class in Harlem, the class

which Cullen himself knew best. When the novel first appeared, readers were easily able to identify Cullen's characters with his own contemporaries, a fact substantiated by his novel's prefatory note revealing "Some of the characters in this book are fictitious" (349). Shucard refers to the characters in this part of the novel as a "menagerie of Harlem's most superficial intellectuals, a crowd drawn from Cullen's impressions of the partygoers whom he had observed in the 1920s when he was one of Harlem's intellectual idols" ("Countee Cullen" 42).

Cullen satirizes his entertaining "intellectuals" by having them appear together in the house of the most prominent Harlem socialite, Constancia Brandon, whose unconventional role in society catches everyone by surprise, beginning with Sam Lucas. Mattie comments to Sam that she has been serving at one of Mrs. Brandon's parties, adding, "I guess you've heard of her" (387). Sam responds, "No, I don't know no white folks there" (387). Unfamiliar with Harlem society, Sam believes that Constancia, Mattie's employer, must be white. The idea of a black lady's having a servant seems foreign to Sam, who tells Mattie that he hears "they ain't so easy to get along with; too uppity" (390). Mattie reassures Sam, saying, "Black folks know better how to treat black folks every time" (390). Sam's disbelief at Mrs. Brandon's

being black yet a good employer sets the stage for Cullen's friendly satire of the middle-class residents of Harlem.

Since Constancia is an integral part of One Way to Heaven as Mattie's employer and the catalyst for bringing the "intellectuals" together, Cullen attempts to characterize her pretensions fully. Her interest in appearances began at an early age when she repudiated both her name and her church. "Born in Boston and baptized Constance in the Baptist church," she changed her name to Constancia and announced

that she found the religious ecstasies of the Baptist and Methodist faiths too harrowing for her nerves; and that she would attempt to scale the heavenly ramparts by way of the less rugged paths of the Episcopalian persuasion. (407-08)

Her self-confidence and interest in society enable her to give the "impression that the great triumvirate, composed of God, the Cabots, and the Lodges" had to be reorganized to include Constancia Brandon (408).

Assured of her position in Negro society, Constancia maintains the pose of the middle class, especially in her speech. While at Radcliffe, Mrs. Brandon earned the nickname Lady Macbeth, "not that she was tragic, but that she never spoke in a monosyllable where she could use a longer word; she never said 'buy' when she might use

'purchase,' and purchased nothing to which she might 'subscribe'" (408). Cullen enjoys satirizing Constancia's elevated vocabulary by revealing the difficulties she has interacting with others. After marrying Dr. George Brandon and moving to Oklahoma, Constancia became a member of an interracial group designed to "exchange ideas and mutual good-will pledges, but not to touch hands" (409). She was soon elected secretary but composed such unintelligible minutes that "when read made the bewildered workers for racial adjustment feel guilty of dark and immoral intentions" (409). "For the sake of racial amity," the committee determined that Constancia should no longer record the minutes (410). Cullen's decision to include Constancia's direct conversations and minutes of the meetings indicates his desire to satirize the manners and pose that she displays, not the lack of education or class of those to whom she speaks.

Additionally, her elevated vocabulary presents problems for her employees. When she lived in Oklahoma, Constancia had difficulty in keeping servants for any period of time. Because she did not want to "speak down" to them, she used her accustomed vocabulary, giving the servants the opportunity to rise to her level. Her choices of phrases such as "Come hither" and "Dispatch this missive" left servants completely bewildered, so they invariably quit without notice. In Harlem, Constancia

finds Mattie, who with a dictionary in her pocket, tries her best to understand Constancia. Mattie finds that she must consult the dictionary often, but she has adjusted well after five years of employment with the Brandons. Mattie understands Constancia when she asks Mattie whether marrying a man "lacking an appendage" is a good idea (415). Also, she appears to understand when Constancia offers advice about Mattie's appearance on her wedding day: "My dear, this is the one occasion on which you must look your supremest, no matter how dowdy you may become afterwards. One's marriage is not a quotidian affair" (423). Known as Harlem's premier hostess, Constancia, anticipating a favorable article about the wedding on the society page, springs into action when she learns that Mattie plans to marry. Constancia unashamedly calls her elite friends, both black and white, to attend the wedding or at least to send a nice gift.

However open to race relations Constancia is, Mattie refuses to have white guests at her wedding. Constancia seems shocked by Mattie's attitude, telling a white friend, "Unfortunately, the child is prejudiced. . . . Yes, that's it, she has race prejudice and simply refuses to have a black-and-tan wedding. So I can't invite you. . . . No, you couldn't pass for colored" (419). At the wedding, after Constancia encourages everyone to "osculate" and to go "on to the viands" (427, 429), Mattie

becomes concerned because she believes that Constancia has invited a white guest, but Constancia explains, "My dear, do you think I would betray you? He's colored" (427). Mattie's attitude toward whites becomes one of Cullen's many objects of satire.

The social highlight of Harlem is, of course, attending one of Constancia Brandon's soirees held on the first and third Mondays of each month, except during the summer. Dissatisfied with the monthly book discussions at the local public library, Constancia initiates her own Booklovers' Society, which is "uncompromisingly interracial" (446). Originally, the group's constitution and by-laws called for these objectives: "to buy and to read books by Negroes; to read (purchase optional) books about Negroes; and to be a small but loyal body on which the Negro can depend for sympathy, understanding, and support" (446). At the monthly meetings at Constancia's house, each member should participate in an "intelligent discussion" of one book (446). The white members, seemingly more eager to learn about the Negro, take the reading assignments much more seriously, but few people come prepared for the discussions, though most criticize the books nevertheless, using such an excuse as "I haven't read the book yet, but in view of what I have heard, I do feel that it should never have been published" (447). Stephen Bronz believes that from Cullen's satire:

we can infer that the middle class Harlem reading public often bought Harlem Renaissance books without reading them, and were more concerned with the fact of a Negro literary renaissance than with the quality of the writings. (64)

The popular soirees soon become a symposium for contemporary issues, and books are relegated to "the lowest sphere of importance" (451). Because participants can express their opinions freely on any subject and because this setting is an opportunity for social advancement, the crowds grow, and Constancia has to change the meetings to "by invitation only" (451). The diversity of personalities and views makes each meeting memorable. Those regularly in attendance include a Back-to-Africa zealot, two black artists who give only their own works as gifts, an Irish-American missionary, a public school teacher who is an advocate of the New Negro, a Jewish graduate student who takes Negro literature very seriously, Harlem socialites, a blues singer, an Englishman who is planning to write a book on Negroes, and another white writer who is also interested in Harlem culture.

Of the black characters in this group, Cullen satirizes no one more than Mrs. De Peyster Johnson, the New York public school teacher who is an advocate of the

New Negro, the African-American movement which espoused racial consciousness. So involved is she with the New Negro Movement that she has problems with her superiors over what the New Negro should be taught. For a time, she began class each day with the Negro national anthem and ended the day with a spiritual, but she was finally made to teach more of the syllabus, except when she bribed the students with refreshments and end-of-the-semester leniency if they would go to her home to hear spirituals and black literature. Proud of her heritage, Mrs. Johnson boasts that she is "probably the one American Negro who could trace her ancestry back through an unbroken and unsullied line of Negroes straight to the first slaves landed in America" (448). To prove this claim, she frequently pulls from her purse her genealogy "traced in veracious black and white" (448). Ridiculing her classroom emphasis on the New Negro to the neglect of the mainstream curriculum as he saw it, Cullen alleges, "So strongly did she emphasize racial purity that the darker children were on the verge of becoming little prigs and openly snubbing their lighter-complexioned comrades" (450). Cullen's satire does, however, remain friendly toward Mrs. Johnson and the New Negro Movement. Bronz says that in One Way to Heaven, Cullen presents "satire directed towards Negroes, and doubtless some of Cullen's own patrons, and such satire stands practically alone in

the Harlem Renaissance" (63).

But Cullen's satire does not stop with the black population; he enjoys satirizing the white guests at the soirees as well. Very open to ideas and reluctant to offer criticism for fear that they would appear less than open-minded, Constancia and her black guests are often subjected to potentially hostile remarks. The Englishman Donald Hewitt visits the meeting and tells Constancia, "I am going to write about your people and dedicate it to you" (452). Constancia ignores the offensive "your people" comment, but Cullen interjects that someone "might have whispered to this novice in race relations that 'your people' coming from white persons sets a Negro's teeth on edge" (452). Miss McGoffin, the Irish-American missionary, uses "you people" and echoes Cullen's most despised Negro stereotype when she asks if Negroes are still writing spirituals. The other white guest, Samuel Weinstein, becomes the most serious student of Negroes, though he is a "thorn in the flesh of most of the darker members of the society" because he comes so well prepared to the Booklovers' Society (446). Also, Cullen writes that Weinstein offers some "caustic comments on Negro life, authors, and books," but because of the apparent openness of the group, no one seems to respond. Despite their differences in opinion and culture, the black and white members of the soirees interact amiably, all wanting

to appear educated and liberal in their responses to the other race.

To this polite mix, Cullen adds Constancia Brandon's supreme joke: her invitation to Professor Seth Calhoun to speak at one of her meetings. Calhoun, an Alabaman, recently published The Menace of the Negro to Our American Civilization, a bitter tract which has resulted in increased lynchings and strained race relations throughout America. Cullen's humorous handling of the professor seems clear in his description of exactly how Calhoun says, "I'm afraid there has been some mistake" (456), upon noticing African-Americans in the room:

He drawled the words in a tone with which phonetics can never cope, but there was in it all the laziness and languor which evoke a panorama of cotton-fields, red-clay earth, bandanna handkerchiefs, and Negro women suckling at their breasts white infants whose claim to distinction and aristocracy when they are older will be the fact that they milked those somber breasts. (456)

Though Calhoun's message could have been racially explosive, Cullen avoids racial tension and focuses on the black members' humorous reaction to Calhoun.

While doing this, Cullen ridicules "several popular myths about Afro-Americans" (Turner 81). Pronouncing

"Negro" as a cross between negro and nigra, Calhoun asserts that the "Negro usually exudes a most unpleasant and disagreeable odor" (462). Cullen proceeds to give the black members' reaction to this comment: one says, "Hear! Hear!"; another says, "Here I am sprinkled down with quelques fleurs, and what's the use?"; another wonders "if the potency of the racial odor was in direct proportion to the lack of Caucasian admixture" (462-63). Moving to another subject, Calhoun proclaims, "There can be no quarter between the white man and a race which can truthfully be stigmatized as indolent, untrustworthy, unintelligent, unclean, immoral, and cursed of heaven" (463). When Calhoun concludes by advocating a congressional order to return blacks to Africa, the Back to Africa camp heartily leads the applause, again illustrating Cullen's humorous satire towards the professor. The evening concludes as Calhoun openly confesses that this is his first time to eat or drink with Negroes. However humorous Cullen's descriptions, he does successfully satirize whites while instructing them in interracial etiquette.

Embedded in the conversation at Constancia Brandon's exclusive meetings are comments about African-American writing and racial issues. After hearing a poem, the female missionary turns to one of the black members, Stanley Bickford, and asks what the poem means. Though

Bickford has not been listening to the reading, he quickly retorts, "Taken in a nutshell, it means that niggers have a hell of a time. . . . That's all Negro poets write about" (455). Cullen also satirizes the ready acceptance of an African-American work by African-American readers because its author is black. Bontemps referred to this attitude among black writers: "We were not too critical. The wonder was that we and our friends could be published at all" ("Old Sis Goose" 53). To satirize this view, Cullen uses the scene celebrating Herbert Newell's new book. Mrs. Johnson, the New Negro advocate, demonstrates what Constancia calls "race pride with a vengeance" because she praises the novel just because Newell is a New Negro (470). One Harlem socialite says of the novel, "I'll buy it out of pride of race although from what I hear, I shall hardly like it, I fear. I don't see why our writers don't write about nice people sometimes" (469).

After learning that the hero and heroine of Newell's book are a stevedore and a prostitute, Constancia wonders if "anything to which we as a race can point to with pride" could come out of such a combination of questionable characters (469). Defending Cullen's opinion that themes should be universal not just racial, Newell contends, "Half a dozen of them tonight have already asked me what the white people will think about the race when they read my book. Good God! I wasn't writing a history

about the Negro. I was trying to write a novel" (470). Here, Cullen describes the tension he must have felt as an African-American writer trying to remain true to his race and to himself while, at the same time, remembering the expectations of the predominantly white reading public and white publishers. Shucard feels that Cullen "could never . . . eradicate or fuse the double-consciousness of which DuBois had spoken; and, in fact, in his only novel, One Way to Heaven, he mocked what he took to be the superficiality of those who could" (Countee Cullen 9).

As a satire, One Way to Heaven derides several groups: the lower-class religious Harlemites duped by Sam and who hold both to their God and their superstitions, the middle class at Constancia's soirees and Cullen's contemporaries whom they represent, and the white world and reading public trying to understand the African-American culture in Harlem. Though Cullen's satire is abundant, almost all of it is light and friendly, especially through his use of pleasant, sometimes humorous, interaction between the black and white characters and through his emphasis on the middle-class society in Harlem.

Jessie Fauset's views about African-American writing and the role of the African-American writer varied widely, depending on whether she was a critic or a writer of fiction at that particular moment. As a member of the

Crisis staff, she attempted "to encourage diversified interests and to attract large numbers of readers. When composing fiction, however, she could only write from herself, of the life she knew best" (Abby Johnson 149). Like Cullen, what she knew best was the life, education, and manners of the black middle class. As a result, she espoused middle-class values as opposed to showing oppressed blacks in a propagandistic novel. In her reviews, Fauset "gave special recognition to those who appeared to convey the heritage of black Americans honestly and artistically" (Abby Johnson 146). She commended R. Archer Tracy's The Sword of Nemesis because "the novel gave her 'relief,' primarily because 'nearly' all the other literature 'on the part of colored Americans seeks to set forth propaganda'" (qtd. in Abby Johnson 145-46). Similarly, Fauset approved of Claude McKay's Harlem Shadows: "He has dwelt in fiery, impassioned language on the sufferings of his race. Yet there is no touch of propaganda. This is the truest mark of genius" (qtd. in Abby Johnson 146).

Like Cullen, Fauset shared her philosophy on African-American writing in the Crisis-sponsored forum "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?". Fauset responds to the question "What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?":

they must learn to write with a humor, a pathos, a sincerity so evident and a delineation so fine and distinctive that their portraits, even of the "best Negroes," those presumably most like "white folks," will be acceptable to publisher and reader alike. (71)

A second solution Fauset gives to curb the inadequate portrayal of African-Americans is the development of a larger black reading public to buy "these books for which they clamor" (71). Addressing another question about artistic portrayal, Fauset blames negative stereotypes partly on white publishers, who have an "idee fixe" of what the white reading public expects from its black characters (72). She notes, however, that her own speaking engagements before white groups have taught her that "many, many of these people are keenly interested in learning about the better class of colored people" (72).

Fauset's interest in presenting the "best Negroes" and the "better class of colored people" permeates her own writing. She seems almost driven at times to prove that there are few, if any, differences between the black middle class and the white middle class in America. The most expressive and most alluded to piece of writing showing Fauset's views is her "Foreword" to The Chinaberry Tree (see Appendix for full text of the "Foreword"). In it, she hopes both to defend her type of writing and to

minimize the difference between white and black middle-class Americans. Answering critics who believed that she avoided race relations too often in her writing, Fauset writes that "there are breathing-spells, in-between spaces where colored men and women work and love and go their ways with no thought of the 'problem.' What are they like then? . . . So few of the other Americans know" (ix). To this end, Fauset creates a novel showcasing the African-American "not being pressed too hard by the Furies of Prejudice, Ignorance, and Economic Injustice" (ix). Such an examination, Fauset claims, reveals that the African-American is "not so vastly different from any other American, just distinctive" (ix). Admitting that she has developed a moral, something she tried to avoid, Fauset concludes her "Foreword" by summarizing her view of the African-American: "Briefly he is a dark American who wears his joy and rue very much as does the white American. He may wear it with some differences but it is the same joy and the same rue" (x).

Noticeably absent from her interviews and writings are African-Americans undergoing oppression or economic difficulties during the Great Depression. Like Cullen, she believes that the black artist should concentrate on the virtues of the middle class in black society so that the best examples of African-American life can be displayed as models for all blacks to emulate and through

which the reading public could be instructed.

Unfortunately, white publishers showed reluctance in furthering Fauset's cause and career. She had difficulty in finding a publisher for her first novel, There Is Confusion (1924), because, as publishers claimed, "it contains no description of Harlem dives, no race riot, no picturesque, abject poverty" (qtd. in Sato 69). Fauset, hoping to become more successful as a popular writer and therefore be allowed more time to develop each novel, admitted to perusing the Saturday Evening Post "in a candid effort to analyze and isolate the germs of popular writing" (qtd. in Sylvander, Jessie Redmon Fauset 209). Because her novels did not conform to the white publishers' expectations about black fiction or to the content of most of the other Harlem Renaissance novels, publication came slowly for her. Abby Johnson adds that a white publisher told Fauset, "White readers just don't expect Negroes to be like this" (qtd. in Johnson 152).

Eight years later, in 1931, when Fauset attempted to publish her third novel, The Chinaberry Tree, she faced the same problem with publishers. Besides their assumptions about how blacks should be portrayed, the Harlem Renaissance was coming to a close, and the Great Depression made readers more conscious of their buying power. Carolyn Sylvander, in Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer, analyzes Fauset's dilemma in the early

1930s:

Having to be aware of a white audience that could publish and buy her work, and a Black audience whose respect was essential to her legitimacy as a Black writer was probably an irreconcilable split for Fauset at this time more so than in the 1920s. (209)

Fauset's efforts alone proved unsuccessful in finding a publisher for The Chinaberry Tree; she then turned to a white writer Zona Gale, who penned an introduction to The Chinaberry Tree. Fauset said she needed to "find someone much better known . . . speaking with a more authentic voice" (qtd. in Sylvander, Jessie Redmon Fauset 74).

In her request to Gale, Fauset said that readers at Stokes, her publisher, "declare plainly that there ain't no such colored people as these, who speak decent English, are self-supporting and have a few ideals" (qtd. in Sylvander, "Jessie Redmon Fauset" 81). That introduction persuaded Stokes to publish the novel though they remained somewhat hesitant about doing so. Gale's introduction defends Fauset's choice of the middle class as subjects in her novel. Noting the great diversity of white character portrayals throughout American fiction, Gale adds that "whenever the American Negro has appeared in fiction, only the uneducated Negro has been pictured" (vii). She proceeds in her authenticating introduction to confirm the

existence of and a description of the black middle class, "Negroes of education and substance" (vii). Furthermore, Gale includes Jessie Fauset as a member of this group, intending to confirm Fauset's ability to write such a novel about Americans "trying for a life of reason and culture" (viii). Stokes marketed the novel by using Gale's name on the cover and in one advertisement Countee Cullen's quotation that he had read the novel "with extreme pleasure" ("The Chinaberry Tree." Advertisement 68). Stokes's advertisement states that the novel "opened a door on the life of the Negro of intellectual interests and on a society little known to the whites" (68).

The Chinaberry Tree, based on a story Fauset heard when she was fifteen, revolves around the black society in Red Brook, New Jersey. Laurentine Strange, the illegitimate daughter of Colonel Francis Halloway, a Southern blue-blood, and Aunt Sal, his black maid, longs for happiness and respectability since most of the townspeople say that she has "bad blood". Melissa, Laurentine's cousin, comes to Red Brook and enjoys the popularity that Laurentine has not been able to achieve. Proud of being legitimate and happily in love with her fiance', Malory Forten, Melissa is shocked to learn that she and Malory are actually half-brother and sister. This information, of course, prevents their marriage, but by the end of the novel, both Melissa and Laurentine have

found husbands, whom they love very much, and acceptance from the townspeople.

Given the content of Zona Gale's introduction and Fauset's foreword, readers should readily anticipate an emphasis on class in the novel. Naturally, the characters' occupations contribute to their categorization into classes of society. Predictably, Fauset creates characters whose occupations reflect their education and success in life. She does mention occasional servants, but she dwells instead on jobs of distinction, especially those in the field of medicine. The novel's three doctors provide the backbone of society in Red Brook; in fact, the families of the two married doctors, Dr. Brown and Dr. Ismay, are considered the two leading black families in the town. The other doctor, Stephen Denleigh, later becomes Laurentine's husband. Because of the doctors' social position, their opinions seem to matter the most to the Red Brook townspeople. At one point, Melissa wonders what Malory will think when he finds out about Laurentine's illegitimacy. She then considers the community's attitudes, believing "that the attitude of the Ismays and above all of Doctor Denleigh ranked higher than the attitude of all the remaining colored people in Red Brook except of course the Browns" (211). As black physicians, they become role models and examples to the young people that they too can set high goals and succeed.

Laurentine refers to the doctors' influence on the community when she encourages Dr. Denleigh:

You're benefitting Red Brook's colored youth marvelously, you must know that. Just think not a single colored boy around here thought of studying medicine until you and the Browns and the Ismays came into this community to show them what was what. (203-04)

Besides creating three successful physicians, Fauset uses other characters to emphasize successful occupations and therefore class as well. As Malory Forten completes high school, he learns that the money left in his trust fund will help him become either an engineer or a doctor.

Asshur Lane, one of Melissa's friends, plans to have a farm but not before studying at Tuskegee Institute. Other black business owners in Red Brook include Hackett, owner of the pool room; Sylvester Forten, a caterer; and Reamer, a grocer.

Almost all the professional people and small business owners in the novel are men, but Laurentine develops a thriving sewing business, which helps her gain the respectability that she desperately seeks. Her reputation as a seamstress helps to bridge the gap between the Strange family's "bad blood" and the community.

Describing Laurentine, Fauset writes, "Her work, her constantly increasing clientele, her dignity, her

remarkable beauty, her distinguished clothes were bringing her a half-begrudged, half-admiring recognition" (19). Though still suffering from the stigma surrounding her birth, Laurentine succeeds to the point that she hires other seamstresses to help her meet the demand for her work.

Not only through her characters' occupations does Fauset illustrate a middle-class lifestyle but also through her descriptions of the homes, social activities, and lives of the people in Red Brook. When Melissa first arrives in Red Brook, she seems overwhelmed that black people live like Aunt Sal and Laurentine. She compares Philadelphia and Red Brook:

Only rich people, she had supposed, lived in this beauty and serenity. There were, she knew, rich colored people. Their affluence to her had meant only lack of necessity for hard labor, plenty of clothes, plenty of food. She had never thought of their possible cultivation of taste, the development of loveliness. (16)

Further comparing the social structure of blacks in Philadelphia and Red Brook, Melissa reveals that the blacks in Philadelphia were a part of "distinctive cliques," "but in Red Brook every colored person knew every one else; all were to be reckoned with, at least all who possessed any economic status" (23, 24).

With "economic status" usually comes social status. Fauset's characters' actions and tastes reflect their prosperity as Fauset furthers her case to show the similarities between the black and white middle classes. Such an instance occurs when Phil Hackett, an admirer of Laurentine, sends a large arrangement of flowers to her home. When Johnasteen Stede, one of Laurentine's employees, sees the flowers, she exclaims, "H'm, ain't never see no such flowers sent from one colored party to another, no suh, not since I been b'on. Colored people gettin' more like w'ite folks every day" (41). The emphasis on culture continues in Fauset's descriptions of the social gatherings, most of which she places in the homes of Dr. Brown and Dr. Ismay. As the illegitimate Laurentine becomes more respectable in Red Brook, she enjoys playing bridge, singing ballads, and learning to drive at the Ismays. An evening with the Browns often involves examining snapshots of scenes at Wellesley, playing cards, reading "God's Trombones," or singing duets (96, 99, 284).

In one of Fauset's most detailed descriptions, she relates the events and fashions at Kitty Brown's party and Melissa's reaction to her evening there. Most of the "well-groomed good-looking lads" there were "students in good Eastern preparatory schools" who "hailed from Trenton, Newark, and even New York" (104-05). Thrilled to

be invited to such a party and very impressed by what she sees, Melissa thinks, "This is lovely. Oh this is perfect. This is where I belong" (104). Melissa's reaction to her temporary acceptance by the socially elite reflects Fauset's view that becoming a part of the middle class should be a goal of anyone who can fit in.

Another way that Fauset presents these values to the reader is through characterization, noting especially the characters' cultivated tastes. An examination of any of her characters could illustrate this pattern, but Malory Forten serves as one of the strongest examples. Fauset, at times, tries entirely too hard to make her point. Described as the "essential lover," Malory reads poetry to Melissa "of beauty and of romance, Tennyson, Rossetti and Swinburne, what he could interpret of the intensely masculine emotionalism of Browning, the divine nebulousness of the Ode of the Intimations of Immortality" (139). One day Denleigh finds Malory and Melissa in the woods reading Vergil. On another occasion, Malory quotes stanzas from Tennyson's "Marianna in the Moated Grange" and later in the novel uses an obscure Tennyson allusion in his conversation with Melissa. Malory's literary acumen does not go unnoticed in the Red Brook social circles. Gertrude Brown, somewhat interested in Malory, approaches him, asking, "And what are you about wandering 'lonely as a cloud'?" (224). His initial reaction to her

is favorable as he notices that "she was well-trained too, and not, as many young people are, ashamed of that training" (227). Believing that having culture is as important as having money in determining class, Malory feels confident, both about his class and his race:

Malory had absolutely no feeling about color. He did not resent it, he did not suffer from the restrictions which his appearance might impose on him, here and there. Of his own racial group he belonged to the cream. Others might have more money--he could make sufficient for his needs. But in birth, gentility, decency, Malory believed, complacently, no one could surpass him. He cared, save in rare instances, surprisingly little for those who could not equal him. (256)

Malory's high opinion of himself typifies the society of Red Brook: very class conscious and either enjoying their position at the top or striving to get there.

Since her focus is on the black middle class in the novel, Fauset rarely mentions anything having to do with race relations, especially any thought of the "problem" as she calls it in the foreword. Segregation does exist in the novel's scenes at the pool hall, one restaurant, and the movie house, but Fauset reports these scenes objectively as if this were just a generally accepted rule

of the times. Only twice in the novel do white characters appear at all: once in Red Brook and the other time in New York City. Fauset mentions the white townspeople in Red Brook as participants at the Ice Carnival. When Melissa and a friend are skating, Fauset writes that "crowds of people, both white and colored, drew up to watch them" (42). That, in fact, is her only reference to the white townspeople except for the minister's concern over what the white people will think if two boys begin fighting over Melissa. Stopping the boys before they actually fight, Reverend Simmons chastises them, "Now boys, boys don't start nothin'. Too many white folks here for that. We don't want this kind of thing closed to us" (44). His concern over the white people's opinion may stem from his being the minister or from his fearing that the blacks may be excluded from the Ice Carnival in the future. Hiroko Sato believes that the Ice Carnival scene illustrates "what a strong influence the problem of race has had in forming black people's mentality" (77). Though Fauset puts little emphasis on this scene, it, nevertheless, illustrates that even the black middle class of Red Brook "have to be decent and moralistic to avoid the deprecating criticism of the whites" (Sato 77).

The other scene involving white people occurs in New York, where Dr. Denleigh, Laurentine, and Mrs. Ismay go to visit. While in New York, the trio visits a Harlem

nightclub and, in predictable behavior of the black middle class, do not like the nightclub and cannot understand it (307). Fauset hopes to distance her characters from Harlem probably since it is associated with the lower class and since the white reading public by 1931 no longer found Harlem in vogue. Dr. Denleigh and Laurentine take an afternoon drive, become hungry, and look for a restaurant for dinner. The subsequent scene presents discrimination in its most blatant form. Unwittingly entering an all-white restaurant, they meet a black waiter who looks "aghast, then recovering himself ushered them to a table against the farthest wall" (310). They endure bad service and insolent remarks from an immigrant waiter who goes from table to table whispering about them, but they do finally get some food, though not what they ordered. In what is probably the only passage in the novel dealing with prejudice, Fauset describes the attitude of the white people in the restaurant:

People turned about and eyed them, people who would have sat beside them in the subway, theatre, drugstore and class-room without a second thought, now suddenly became overwhelmingly aware of their presence because of the machination of one little sallow-skinned foreigner whose country Denleigh, fighting in 1918, had perhaps helped to keep from

dissolution. (312)

Though a powerful scene describing discrimination, it seems a digression in setting and theme. Carolyn Sylvander, in Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer, believes that the out-of-town trip to New York "seems to have no function in The Chinaberry Tree except to make opportunity for the incorporation of the restaurant incident" and that the scene "raises many questions and thoughts which it is clearly not Fauset's conscious intention to introduce into the novel" (209). Unlike most of the rest of the novel, which Fauset based on a story she heard in her youth, she added the restaurant scene to the original story. Such an incident occurred, Fauset said, "almost exactly as it is described" to her and her husband during the summer she wrote The Chinaberry Tree (qtd. in Sylvander, Jessie Redmon Fauset 209).

Maybe her own bitter experience led her to include the scene, or maybe she felt she owed a brief mention of "the problem" to her black readers. Whatever her motive, its inclusion undercuts what she has been trying to present in the novel: that the black middle class and white middle class are very similar. The New York scene implies that these two classes may be similar only in Red Brook, not in New York, and that the black middle class culture of Red Brook does not matter that much. A minor but significant scene, it confirms that racial prejudice

remains a force in American society, a belief addressed by Sato, who writes that "this book presents a deeper and subtler problem--the impact of racial discrimination and prejudices by the whites on black society in the long run" (77). Similarly, Robert Bone agrees that "racial discrimination" is "always present as an obstacle to gracious living and is the real antagonist of her novels. Racial protest, be it ever so genteel, is an irrepressible feature of bourgeois nationalism" (102).

Fauset's characterization of the black middle class in *Red Brook* also undercuts her message; in fact, her characterization creates a satire of the black middle class. Fauset tries too hard to make the black middle class genteel and respectable in their tastes, appearances, and views. Shaemas O'Sheel, a New York Times reviewer, argues that to present the social life as "a thing so primly Victorian, with never a hint of another side, is a dubious service" (qtd. in Singh 63). Bone's survey of African-American literature includes only one statement specifically about The Chinaberry Tree: "The Chinaberry Tree (1931) seems to be a novel about the first colored woman in New Jersey to wear lounging pajamas" (102). As simplistic as Bone's analysis is, it, nevertheless, exemplifies Fauset's emphasis in the novel. James Young criticizes "Fauset's idealized treatment of the middle class" (206) and notes this about her

characterization:

Her characters are not real human beings, they are idealizations of what the Negro middle class conceived itself to be. Ironically, this novel . . . is more effective for its unintended criticism, even satire, of the middle class's irrelevance than in demonstrating its potential for dramatic realization. (207)

While both One Way to Heaven and The Chinaberry Tree demonstrate Cullen's and Fauset's desire to showcase the black middle class in a raceless novel, both novels, either consciously or unconsciously, satirize the very group they attempt to extol and force the reader to question the relevance of such a group to society. Nevertheless, both works include elements of the previously described raceless novel: there is little, if any, racial tension, there is not much protest or propaganda, and the novels do not depict blacks as "defeated, humiliated, degraded, or victimized" (Washington, I Love Myself When I Am Laughing 16). James Young agrees that Cullen's and Fauset's novels "displayed little social awareness of the problems of most black Americans" (205). The only one of these three criteria present at all in One Way to Heaven and The Chinaberry Tree is the minor use of racial tension: in One Way to Heaven, the incident with Professor Calhoun, though

humorously and satirically described, does provide some racial tension, and the restaurant scene in The Chinaberry Tree obviously illustrates discrimination. The inclusion of these scenes reflects that behind every apparently insulated society of middle-class African-Americans, there remain a white society and racial issues to face. Despite these two scenes, both novels champion the African-American's place in the middle class. Cullen and Fauset attempt to prove that Constancia Brandon and her pretentious Harlem friends along with the townspeople of Red Brook, New Jersey, are indeed much more similar to than different from the white middle class.

## Chapter 4

### Raceless Novels of the Rural South: Hurston's Jonah's Gourd Vine and Their Eyes Were Watching God

Coming between the early 1930s novels of Cullen and Fauset and the militant fiction of Richard Wright's Native Son (1940) were two of Zora Neale Hurston's raceless novels: Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934) and Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937). Hurston left the middle-class Harlem setting enjoyed by Cullen and Fauset, opting instead for the rural South, much as Henderson's Ollie Miss had done. Besides writing a total of four novels, Hurston published short stories, plays, two books of folklore, and an autobiography. Lillie Howard claims that "from the 1930s through the 1960s, Zora Neale Hurston was the most prolific and accomplished black woman writer in America" (133). With this fame, however, came much controversy. Expected to write about racial issues but usually choosing not to do so, Hurston came under fire from the more militant African-American writers, who felt that her writings did not accurately reflect the racial situation in America during Hurston's day. Her comments about race and two of her novels, Jonah's Gourd Vine and Their Eyes Were Watching God, illustrate her views toward her role as a writer of raceless fiction.

Unlike Cullen and Fauset, who were reared in Northern educated communities, Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, five miles from Orlando. Despite its proximity to that city, Eatonville remained an insulated all-black town; the only white people ever seen there were visitors. Robert Hemenway, Hurston's biographer, calls Eatonville "proud and independent, living refutation of the white claims that black inability for self-government necessitated the racist institutions of a Jim Crow South" (Zora Neale Hurston 12). Apparently free from white influences, Eatonville governed itself; in fact, Hurston's father, a Baptist minister, served as mayor for three terms. The town's independent spirit created an environment in which its citizens' self-esteem flourished. Howard feels that "the all-black, incorporated, self-governing town of Eatonville fostered and nurtured the strong, unshakable sense of self that was later to inform Hurston's fiction and govern her life" (134). Though Hurston's mother died when Zora was nine and she lived with relatives and friends until she left Eatonville at sixteen, she remembered Eatonville "as a place of great peace and happiness" (Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston 10). While in Eatonville, she heard hours of stories told on the front porch of Joe Clarke's store. These stories and the lives of the townspeople went with Hurston as she left Eatonville, later shaping the content of her fiction.

At sixteen, Hurston worked for a white singer in a travelling Gilbert and Sullivan company. Her Southern speech and folk tales intrigued and amused her Northern listeners. Recalling Eatonville's and the South's influence on her, Hurston writes about her identity:

I was a Southerner, and had the map of Dixie on my tongue. . . . It was not that my grammar was bad, it was the idioms. They did not know of the way an average Southern child, white or black, is raised on simile and invective. They know how to call names. It is an everyday affair to hear somebody called a mullet-headed, mule-eared, wall-eyed, hog-nosed, 'gator-faced, shad-mouthed, screw-necked, goat-bellied, puzzle-gutted, camel-backed, butt-sprung, battle-hammed, knock-kneed, razor-legged, box-ankled, shovel-footed, unmated so-and-so! . . . They can tell you in simile exactly how you walk and smell. They can furnish a picture gallery of your ancestors, and a notion of what your children will be like. What ought to happen to you is full of images and flavor. Since that stratum of the Southern population is not given to book-reading, they take their comparisons right out of the barnyard and the woods. When they get through with you, you and your whole family look like an acre of totem-poles. (Dust

Tracks on a Road 98)

These folk idioms and the interesting people who use them will become the backbone of Jonah's Gourd Vine and Their Eyes Were Watching God.

After traveling with the Gilbert and Sullivan troupe for eighteen months, Hurston attended Morgan Academy and Howard University before going to Barnard College, the women's division of Columbia University. The only black student at Barnard in 1920, Hurston studied under Franz Boas, one of the leading influences on Hurston's career. In "Zora Neale Hurston and the Eatonville Anthropology," Robert Hemenway describes Boas as "one of the leading American scientists of the early twentieth century and a man of great personal magnetism" (196). One of Hurston's papers impressed Boas, who encouraged her to become an anthropologist herself. She describes him in her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road (1942), as "the greatest anthropologist alive" (127) and "the king of kings" (123), and she even called him "Papa Franz" (123). Equipped with a lifetime of stories from her youth and enthusiastic about Boas and the field of anthropology, Hurston left Barnard with a B. A. degree in 1927 and the desire to become a serious anthropologist.

With Boas's influence, Hurston received a fellowship to study folklore in the South. Unfortunately, she attempted this project as a Barnard-educated, serious

social scientist and not as an Eatonville-born listener and collector of folk tales. As a result, her scientific methods and seemingly aloof personality never won over the people whose narratives she had hoped to collect. Hurston describes her fact-finding fiasco:

My first six months were disappointing. I found out later that it was not because I had not talents for research, but because I did not have the right approach. The glamor of Barnard College was still upon me. I dwelt in marble halls. I knew where the material was all right. But, I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, "Pardon me, but do you know any folk-tales or folk-songs?" The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores looked at me and shook their heads. No, they had never heard of anything like that around there. Maybe it was over in the next county. Why didn't I try over there? I did, and got the selfsame answer. Oh, I got a few little items. But compared with what I did later, not enough to make a flea a waltzing jacket. Considering the mood of my going south, I went back to New York with my heart beneath my knees and my knees in some lonesome valley.

I stood before Papa Franz and cried salty  
tears. (Dust Tracks on a Road 27-28)

Despite her perceived failure in collecting folk material, Hurston received invaluable experience that helped her successfully gather material in the future. Her academic training, her life's experiences, and the folklore project all illustrate her interest in and love for the idioms and tales of the rural black people in the South.

Another influence which perhaps led Hurston to write raceless fiction involves her support by white patrons. Though many black writers received financial support from white supporters, Hurston's involvement exceeded that of most black writers, and as a result, she received much criticism for supposedly writing only what her patrons wanted her to write. Hurston received funding to attend Barnard from Annie Nathan Meyers while she also worked as a secretary and driver for Fannie Hurst. Both of these ladies encouraged Hurston's career financially and gave her excellent references. Charlotte Osgood Mason, also a patron of Langston Hughes, assisted Hurston by supplying her two hundred dollars a month for two years to collect folklore. Mason's interests involved the "primitive" aspects of black culture, which Langston Hughes bears out in his account of Mason:

Concerning Negroes, she felt that they were  
America's greatest link with the primitive, and

that they had something very precious to give to the Western World. She felt that there was mystery and mysticism and spontaneous harmony in their souls, but many of them had let the white world pollute and contaminate that mystery and harmony, and make something of it cheap and ugly, commercial and, as she said, "white." She felt that we had a deep well of the spirit within us and that we should keep it pure and deep. (Hughes, The Big Sea 316)

While Hurston worked for her until 1931, Mason placed a major restriction on Hurston's research: she "was to limit her correspondence and publish nothing of her research without prior approval" (Hemenway, "Zora Neale Hurston and the Eatonville Anthropology" 206). How much Mason intervened in Hurston's writing remains unknown, but Mason's interest in the spirit of the African-American people's remaining "pure and deep" also could have affected Hurston's content. True, Hurston's novels were published after the formal patronage had ended, but white patrons could have already exerted their influence on her writing before her first novel, Jonah's Gourd Vine, was published in 1934.

Hurston received such criticism because she refused to write much about racial problems in America. In Black Writers of the Thirties, James Young says of Hurston:

Indeed, she was perhaps less concerned than any other black writer during the period with the conventional problems of the Negro. Casting aside the problems of race relations, her novels are set entirely within the black community.

(219)

Arna Bontemps's review of Hurston's Dust Tracks on a Road (1942) characterizes her writing this way: "Miss Hurston deals very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America--she ignores them. She has done right well by herself in the kind of world she found" (3). Ironically, Bontemps wrote the review in 1942, eleven years after the publication of his own raceless novel, God Sends Sunday.

Hurston's black contemporaries, feeling betrayed by her refusal to deal with "the problem," generally wrote that Hurston had fallen victim to the white patronage that she had enjoyed. In Infants of the Spring (1932), Wallace Thurman blasts Hurston's association with her white patrons in a description of Sweetie Mae Carr, a caricature of Hurston:

She was a great favorite among those whites who went in for Negro prodigies. Mainly because she lived up to their conception of what a typical Negro should be. It seldom occurred to any of her patrons that she did this with tongue in

cheek. Given a paleface audience, Sweetie Mae would launch forth into a saga of the little all-colored Mississippi town where she claimed to have been born. Her repertoire of tales was earthy, vulgar and funny. Her darkies always smiled through their tears. (229)

Hurston's associations and lasting friendships with white patrons similarly bothered Langston Hughes, who ironically benefited from the same patron as did Hurston. Hughes satirically wrote of Hurston in "Harlem Literati in the Twenties":

In her youth, she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion. . . . To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect "darkie," in the nice meaning they give the term--that is, a naive, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro. (14)

Clearly, Hurston's critics overwhelmingly assumed that her lack of attention to racial themes resulted from her white patronage. Besides this reason, Darwin Turner believes also that Hurston concealed "her resentment of white Americans" because she wanted so badly to have her works published and read by white publishers and a white reading

public (94).

Whatever her reason for not writing in the racially sensitive way that might have suited Thurman and Hughes, Hurston defended her position more openly than any other writer of raceless works. In fact, her openness in voicing her views often fueled the controversy. In one of her most controversial writings, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," she declares:

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are hurt about it. . . . No, I do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

(216)

Never does Hurston deny that problems exist for African-Americans; instead, she chose to focus on the more positive side of the issue--that black Americans can somehow rise above such problems. In Twentieth Century Authors, she further explains: "We talk about the race problem a great deal, but go on living and laughing and striving like everyone else" (qtd. in Howard 139).

Hurston's experiences in Eatonville and her interest in folklore both contributed to her focus on the ability of

African-Americans to press forward, despite any problems they might encounter. As an anthropologist, Hurston viewed everyone she encountered as an individual, almost as a scientific specimen whose color or heritage did not seem to matter much. Nick Ford, in The Contemporary Negro Novel: A Study in Race Relations, recalls an interview with Hurston in which he asked her about race and specifically about race in Jonah's Gourd Vine. She openly admitted that many blacks did not like the novel because she had not "made it a lecture on the race problem" (Ford 96). When Ford followed up his question by asking why she had not chosen to write on the race problem, Hurston responded, "Because I was writing a novel and not a treatise on sociology. There is where many Negro novelists make their mistakes. They confuse art with sociology" (96). In one of the most insightful exchanges, Ford recalls asking Hurston specifically about her obligation to write about racial issues:

"But," I said, "how can you write without being forever conscious of your race and the multitude of injustices which is heaped upon it in our present social order?"

She smiled a bit condescendingly. "You see," she began benignantly, "I have ceased to think in terms of race; I think only in terms of individuals. I am interested in you now, not as

a Negro man but as a man. I am not interested in the race problem, but I am interested in the problems of individuals, white ones and black ones." (96)

Several theories exist explaining why Hurston wrote raceless fiction; any single theory or a combination of several theories seems plausible. Perhaps her independent roots in Eatonville and the stories she heard resulted in her interest in creating an all-black fictional town. Perhaps her training as an anthropologist influenced her focus on writing about individuals, not race. Possibly the white patrons from whom she benefited and whose lifetime friendships she enjoyed played a major role in her avoiding controversial black-white situations. Or, like other black novelists of the 1930s, perhaps she felt overly conscious of what the white publishers would accept for publication and what the white reading public would consume, realizing the economic situation in the United States in the 1930s. Whatever the reason, Hurston succeeded in producing works in which there is little, if any, racial tension, there is little propaganda, and there is not a depiction of blacks as "defeated, humiliated, degraded, or victimized." Both Jonah's Gourd Vine and Their Eyes Were Watching God illustrate these characteristics of the raceless novel.

Set in Alabama and Eatonville, Jonah's Gourd Vine

chronicles the life of John Pearson, a black minister whose humanity too often conquers any divinity that he might hope to possess. John's dual role as a fallible human and a minister creates obvious problems and conflicts for him. Writing to James Weldon Johnson, Hurston attempted to explain John's character:

I have tried to present a Negro preacher who is neither funny nor an imitation Puritan ram-rod in pants. Just the human being and poet that he must be to succeed in a Negro pulpit. I do not speak of those among us who have been tampered with and consequently have gone Presbyterian or Episcopal, I mean the common run of us who love magnificence, beauty, poetry and color so much that there can never be enough of it. (April 16, 1934)

The son of a white plantation owner and his black worker, Amy, John lives with his mother and stepfather, Ned, who resents John's white blood and calls him "yaller" (4). When Ned tries to bind John over to a cruel farmer, Amy steps in and tells John to find Pearson, Amy's former employer and, unbeknown to John, his father. On Pearson's plantation, John moves up the ranks and receives more responsibility, especially after he attends school. While at school, he meets Lucy Potts, whom he later marries, despite strong objections from Lucy's mother. After

trouble with unfaithfulness and beating up Lucy's brother, John travels to Eatonville, where he asks, "You mean dey runnin' de town 'thout de white folks?" (107).

Already known for his eloquent prayers in church, John one day announces that he has been called to preach. His continual marital infidelity causes controversy at home and in his church. Lucy becomes ill and dies, and within three months, John has married his mistress, Hattie. John's powerful preaching outweighs his womanizing for a time in the minds of the congregation, but Hattie divorces him. He finally resigns his position, fails as a carpenter because of the town's lowered opinion of him, and moves to Plant City, where he becomes reacquainted with Sister Sally Lovelace, a churchgoer who remembers him when he held a prestigious position as minister. With his self-esteem somewhat boosted, John decides to marry Sally. Wealthy and generous with her wealth, Sally provides John with a Cadillac, which he drives back to his old church. Though he tries to avoid temptation once again, he finally succumbs to the wiles of Ora Patton. Feeling very guilty, John thinks of himself as a "False pretender! Outside show to the world!" (200). Consumed by his guilt and "half-seeing the railroad from looking inward," he never sees the train that hits his car and kills him (200).

In naming the novel, Hurston alludes to the Biblical

story of Jonah and the gourd vine, found in Jonah 4. After God relents from destroying Nineveh, Jonah goes east of the city to sulk. While there, God provides the vine which grows up and provides shelter for Jonah. The next day God sends a worm to destroy the plant, leaving Jonah with no shade and a scorching wind. Explaining to Carl Van Vechten the connection between Jonah's story and John Pearson, Hurston said, "Great and sudden growth. One act of malice and it is withered and gone" (February 28, 1934). Since Hurston's allusion is never a sustained one in the novel, difficulty arises when trying to determine the "act of malice" that strikes John down. Hemenway believes that the "act of malice" that John is guilty of occurs when he hits Lucy, who is already lying on her deathbed. She accuses him of having his mistress's letters in their house and of "livin' dirty" (128). Shortly thereafter, Lucy dies, and John, feeling very guilty, has dreams of her. Hurston's novel depicts John simply as a human being prone to err. Though he frequently falls into sin, he tries hard to avoid temptation, such as when he repeatedly asks Sally to go with him on his final trip. As a result of Hurston's portrayal of John, the reader sympathizes much more and sees John just as a man, which was Hurston's intended purpose.

However interesting a protagonist John might be,

Hurston often uses John and the other characters as agents to further her analysis of folklore in the South. Andrew Burris believes that in Jonah's Gourd Vine Hurston uses "her characters and the various situations created for them as mere pegs upon which to hang their dialect and folkways" (6). John Lowe feels that sharing folklore was Hurston's goal in the novel:

Hurston's purpose in Jonah was to show the world the glory of black folklore and language, and their central role in sustaining the community, particularly in the rhetoric of the minister and in the metaphors of everyday games and verbal exchanges. It was meant to demonstrate what Hurston had challenged Blacks in general to do in her December, 1934 article in The Washington Tribune: recognize the fact that Afro-American folk expression had an integrity that was every bit as fine as that of Anglo-American culture.

(229)

Hurston's critics still charge that Hurston the folklore collector often overrules Hurston the novelist in Jonah's Gourd Vine. The plethora of folk expressions takes precedence over the plot, characterization, and conflict. To illustrate Hurston's dependence on folklore in the novel, Darwin Turner has compiled a list of four examples that typify the experiences that Hurston uses:

God was grumblin' his thunder and playin' the  
zig-zag lightning thru his fingers.

De chickens is cacklin' in de rice and dey say  
"Come git it whilst iss fitten' cause t'morrer  
it may be frostbitten!"

Seben years ain't too long fuh uh coudar tuh  
wear uh ruffled bosom shirt.

Ah means to beat her 'til she rope lak okra, and  
den agin Ah'll stomp her 'til she slack lak  
line. (qtd. in Turner 102)

Besides the many folk expressions Hurston relates, she also adds to the novel information that she gathered years earlier while studying folklore in the South. Rather than constructing a sermon to fit John Pearson's character and his situation as he prepares to leave his congregation, Hurston relies on her field notes. Hemenway says that the seven-page sermon that John delivers actually came almost verbatim from a sermon delivered by Reverend C. C. Lovelace of Eau Gallie, Florida, on May 3, 1929 (Zora Neale Hurston 197). While illustrating John's poetic and speaking abilities, the sermon never quite sounds like his; it remains devoid of any emotional struggle that he might feel (Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston 198). John's sermon or not, it effectively moves the crowd as they hear about the wounds of Jesus. Proud of the heritage of black ministers in the South and hoping to show the black

minister's role as poet, Hurston has selected a sermon that flows poetically from one idea to the next while at the same time preserving the delivery associated with black preachers--short sentences and grammatical parallelisms which increase the speed and emotional intensity of the sermon. Illustrating the delivery and content of a rural black minister is this excerpt from John's sermon:

I want to draw a parable.

I see Jesus

Leaving heben with all of His grandeur

Dis-robin' Hisself of His matchless honor

Yielding up de scepter of revolvin' worlds

Clothing Hisself in de garment of humanity

Coming into de world to rescue His friends.

Two thousand years have went by on their rusty  
ankles

But with the eye of faith, I can see Him

Look down from His high towers of elevation

I can hear Him when He walks about the golden  
streets

I can hear 'em ring under His footsteps

Sol me-e-e, Sol do

Sol me-e-e, Sol do

I can see Him step out upon the rim bones of  
nothing

Crying I am de way  
De truth and de light  
Ah!  
God A'mighty! (177-78)

John's final sermon, the folk expressions, the games played, and laughter heard throughout the novel illustrate Hurston's love of Southern folklore and her desire to share it with her readers of Jonah's Gourd Vine. Because folklore dominates the novel, few discussions regarding racial issues exist; most of these comments deal with black-white relationships, but some involve intraracial issues as well, especially color and class. Hurston notes that the lighter the complexion of her character, the more likely he is to have a position of leadership or work as a household servant; darker blacks seem more likely to work in outside positions requiring harder labor (4).

Moreover, Hurston includes comments that blacks make concerning those blacks like John who live on the other side of the creek. This class distinction becomes obvious when the children laugh at John for not wearing shoes and for not knowing what a train is (13, 15).

Like Cullen and Fauset, Hurston enjoys satirizing those of her race who feel compelled to write or speak only about racial issues. Such a character in Jonah's Gourd Vine exists in Reverend Felton Cozy, invited to speak by John's adversaries in the congregation who hope

that Cozy will replace John. When the Sunday morning service begins, John delivers a powerful sermon and is then followed by Cozy, who claims, "Ahm a race man! Ah solves the race problem. One great problem befo' us tuhday is whut is de blacks gointer do wid de whites?" (158). Claiming that Adam and Jesus were both black, he adds, "Wese de smartest people God ever made and de prettiest" (159). Cozy's oration does not go over well at all. Sister Boger whispers, "Ah ain't heard whut de tex' wuz" and later adds, "Dat wan't no sermon. Dat wuz uh lecture" (158, 159). Cozy's remarks clearly seem out of place, both in the congregation's worship service and in their all-black town.

Likewise, Hurston avoids black-white issues almost completely in Jonah's Gourd Vine. Arthur Davis examines the lack of racial tension in the novel:

The novel's scene is the rural Deep South with its laughing-singing-tall-tale-telling folk Negroes, with its sometime stormy church life, and with its "good" white folks in the distant background. There is no protest in this novel; it is an inside work dealing mainly with Negroes. There are no gouging white landlords or vicious white lynchers. In short, we see here the kind of good-will attitude which will characterize all of Miss Hurston's fiction

dealing with Negroes. She simply ignored most of the unpleasant racial aspects of Southern life--aspects that have to be recognized if a full picture is to be given. This shutting of the eyes on Miss Hurston's part is a kind of artistic dishonesty that takes away from the work. All Southern whites are certainly not villains and oppressors of blacks, but an artist can hardly ignore the system of oppression and discrimination in which Negroes in the thirties lived daily; and yet Miss Hurston, somehow, manages to do so. (115-16)

Though race never becomes much of an issue in this novel, Hurston does include several white characters and comments about white people in general. Two of the most despicable white characters in the novel are the sharecroppers, Beasley and Mimms, whom John meets while still living in Alabama. Hurston describes both men as white trash and adversarial in their relationships with John's family. Beasley steals cotton belonging to Ned after telling Ned that he could store it in his barn (6, 7). Mimms, the man that John almost has to work for, once worked as an overseer on a plantation, where "he done whipped niggers nigh tuh death" (7). Once John leaves Alabama, he never encounters their type again in the remainder of the novel.

On the other hand, Hurston encourages a very positive

reading of Alf Pearson, the plantation owner who is also John's father and referred to as "quality white folks" (11). Though John never knows that Pearson is his father, the white man notes that John's "face looks sort of familiar" and asks him the name of his mother (17). When John arrives at Pearson's place, one of the workers tells him about his treatment of his workers: "He ain't gwine overwork yuh. He don't break nobody down. Befo' surrender he didn't had no whippin' boss on dis place. Nawsuh. Come tuh 'membrance, 'tain't nothin' much tuh do now" (20).

Besides not making John work very hard, Pearson assists him when he lands in jail for assaulting his brother-in-law and stealing a pig. Pearson has John released in his charge and suggests that he escape even though John still has an upcoming court appearance. He comments to John that "distance is the only cure for certain diseases," gives him fifty dollars, and adds that "there's several hours before midnight" (99). At Pearson's suggestion, John successfully flees Alabama, partly because Pearson will not give the authorities any information about John's hasty departure. Though the reader might expect preferential treatment for John since he is Pearson's son, Hurston strengthens her already positive characterization of Pearson by having other workers, besides John, praise him and by stressing the

good working conditions on his plantation.

John's only encounter with white people in Florida occurs when Hattie brings charges of adultery against him. Wary of the legal system, most of John's friends feel that "de laws and de cotehouses and de jail houses all b'longed tuh white folks" (165). After Hattie makes her accusations, John simply pleads guilty without offering any defense whatsoever. When one of John's friends asks why he did not call him as a witness to tell about Hattie's lovers, John declares, "Ah didn't want de white folks tuh hear 'bout nothin' lak dat. . . . Dey thinks wese all ignorant as it is, and dey thinks wese all alike, and dat dey knows us inside and out" (168-69). Paralleling Hurston's own view about the content of black writing, John interjects, "Dey's some strings on our harp fuh us tuh play on and sing all tuh ourselves" (169).

The Alabama white trash, Pearson, and the courthouse crowd are Hurston's only look at white characters in the novel, but she does include in passing several other references to white people or their attitudes. John's family understandably does not want the "buckra" (white people) to hear their conversations about Mimms. Ned comments that the "white man fret and worry and kill hissself. Colored folks fret uh li'l' while and gwan tuh sleep" (10). John sees black children are now becoming educated "like white folks" (13). Sister Lovelace tells

John a folk expression, "Ah reckon you say niggers got all de signs and white folks got all de money" (186).

Hurston's characters mention that the white man has stolen the black man's inventions, especially the train and electricity (148). Finally, because so many black workers have left Florida to work in the North, the wages in Florida have risen, and white farmers are wanting laws to keep black people from buying railroad tickets (150).

Though some of these statements imply that black people have undergone injustices, Hurston never makes an issue of any of these statements. Indeed, she almost completely avoids black-white interaction in the novel.

Four years after Jonah's Gourd Vine appeared, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston's third novel, was published in 1937. Whereas Jonah's Gourd Vine emphasizes folklore and the individual life of a black preacher, Their Eyes Were Watching God narrates Janie Crawford's search for love and independence in her three marriages. Like the first novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God focuses on the individual's life in a predominantly black culture filled with numerous possibilities for Hurston to dramatize African-American folklore. Sometimes seen as the first liberated black female character, Janie gains increasing independence as she moves through her three husbands. S. Jay Walker believes that the novel "deals far more extensively with sexism, the struggle of a woman

to be regarded as a person in a male-dominated society, than racism, the struggle of blacks to be regarded as persons in a white-dominated society" (520). Noting Janie's importance to the literature that followed, Cary Wintz calls Janie "the strongest and the most memorable female character to appear in any work of the Renaissance" (214). In her introduction to Their Eyes Were Watching God, Mary Helen Washington evaluates "the novel's unique contribution to black literature: it affirms black cultural traditions while revising them to empower black women" (x). Not only does the novel present a stronger black female character than ever before, but Hurston also tells Janie's story in a different way. Barbara Christian notes this difference: "For the first time in black literature, we feel the growing up of a black girl, not from without but from within" (57). Thus, the reader experiences Janie's life through a fuller characterization which encourages him to note her progressive liberation, allowing Hurston to include race as an issue only when it furthers Janie's framework story told to her best friend, Pheoby Watson.

Janie recalls growing up with her grandmother and the white family she worked for. She says she called her grandmother Nanny because everyone else on the place did. Identity problems begin early for Janie, who until age six, when she sees a picture of herself, believes that she

is white. Reflecting on her youth, Janie believes that "her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate" when Nanny saw her kissing Johnny Taylor (10). Aware of her own aging and conscious of Janie's maturing body, Nanny resolves to find a husband to take care of Janie. Brother Logan Killicks, owner of sixty acres, becomes Nanny's choice as Janie's husband though Janie remarks that he "look lak some ole skullhead in de grave yard" (13). Much older than Janie and already a widower, Killicks has little to offer Janie except his set ways; he does not bathe often enough, he never mentions "nothin' pretty," and he argues that she should chop wood as his first wife had done. Janie becomes saddened by Nanny's death and her realization that "marriage did not make love" (24).

One day, while Killicks has gone to see a man about a mule, Janie meets Joe Starks, described as "a cityfied, stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn't belong in these parts" (26). Joe, who has always worked for "white folks," plans to go to Florida, where "he heard all about 'em makin' a town all outa colored folks" (27). Shortly thereafter, without a word to Killicks, Janie plans to meet Joe in the woods to go to Eatonville, Florida. As she considers leaving, she thinks, "Even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to do her good" (31). Legally, Janie commits bigamy by marrying Joe, but she wants happiness

and a better situation so badly that divorcing Killicks never crosses her mind. They arrive in Eatonville to find the town "a raw place in de woods" (32). An extremely ambitious man, Joe buys two hundred more acres to add to the town, opens a store, gets permission to have a post office, and soon finds himself mayor, postmaster, landlord, and storekeeper of Eatonville. Joe, shortly after their marriage, becomes much more domineering toward Janie, and she feels isolated and lonely. When the town names Joe mayor, the people ask Janie to say "uh few words uh encouragement," but Joe interrupts that his "wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'" (40). She leaves the meeting, walking "behind him that night feeling cold" (41).

Joe's store and its operation consume Janie's time. Lacking experience, she asks Joe for some help, but he tells her running the store should be easy "if yuh got uh thimble full uh sense" (41). When the pig feet disappear from the store, Joe lashes out at Janie, telling her, "Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho' don't think none theirselves" (67). Robert Bone notes that Killicks's sixty acres and Joe's store create a "dramatic tension" "between the sound business instincts of Janie's two husbands and her own striving toward a full life" (129). Similarly, Roger Rosenblatt adds that to Janie "what they offer is a

variety of death: passionless lives lacking any sense of creativity" (87).

Joe's "passionless" life becomes apparent in his attitude toward the front porch crowd, their stories, and their laughter. Strangely enough, Janie would have enjoyed her hard work at the store had Joe only let her participate in the gatherings on the front porch, which Hemenway calls Hurston's "stage for the presentation of black folklore" (Zora Neale Hurston 239). The laughter and Janie's participation in it anger Joe, who believes that the townspeople laugh too much and are into too much foolishness. Joe discourages Janie's appearances on the front porch, insisting that she should stay inside and wear the head rag as he has asked her to do so that no one will see her beautiful hair. Their difference in opinion over the front porch ultimately leads to her losing all respect for him. Joe blames the disappearance of the pig feet on Janie's listening to the stories; he yells, "If you'd git yo' mind out de streets and keep it on yo' business maybe you could git somethin' straight sometimes" (66). Scenes like this one make her realize that "he wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he had it" (67). Tension continues to build until one day at breakfast Joe slaps Janie, and "something fell off the shelf inside her" so that she never feels the same about him (67).

For a time, Janie feels defeated and seems very distracted at her work, but she begins to gain her independence from him as his public ridicule of her escalates. When Joe insults both her abilities and her age one day in the store, Janie lashes back at Joe:

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life. (75)

Janie commits the unpardonable sin by berating Joe in front of his male friends: "she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing" (75). When Joe becomes sick, he has "old lady Davis" cook for him because he believes that Janie is poisoning him. Actually suffering from kidney disease, he gets much sicker and tries to refuse Janie's visits. Before he dies, however, Janie says he will finally listen to her. In their final conversation, she tells him that after twenty years of marriage, they do not know each other. Also, she lets him know how he has defeated her spirit: "Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out

tuh make room for yours in me. . . . All dis bowin' down, all dis obedience under yo' voice--dat ain't whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you" (82).

With her oppressor dead, Janie burns her head rags, wears her hair down, and sits on the store's front porch to listen to stories whenever she likes, observing that "this freedom feeling was fine" (86). Into her life one afternoon walks Vergible Woods, better known as Tea Cake, who brings laughter and fun back into Janie's life from their first meeting when he teaches her to play checkers, normally played only by the men. The result of his attention toward her is that "she found herself glowing inside. Somebody had wanted her to play" (91). Though Janie is twelve years older than he, that does not matter to her because Tea Cake treats her as an equal and brings her happiness. Pheoby's comment that Tea Cake is of a lower class and Hezekiah's remark that Tea Cake "ain't got doodly squat" do not deter Janie at all (98). Tea Cake loves life and makes her have fun in several creative ways: mimicking a guitar with his voice, going fishing after midnight, enjoying lemonade and pound cake by moonlight, playing the piano, laughing most of the time, and buying her "special groceries" because she is special. When Pheoby protests that Janie plans to sell the store and marry Tea Cake, Janie tells her: "Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and

titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine" (108).

Unlike Janie's previous two husbands, Tea Cake encourages Janie to go places and do things with him. Howard suggests that Tea Cake is a "hedonist" (140), and Bone believes that "Tea Cake represents intensity and experience" (130). Living life to its fullest becomes the philosophy of Janie and Tea Cake, who marry in Jacksonville. While there, he disappears for several days, returning with a guitar and the confession that he lost almost all of Janie's money playing cards. He later regains the money, and they travel to the Everglades for bean-picking season. Living in little more than a shack, Janie laughingly wonders what her Eatonville friends would think if they could see her. Despite the housing conditions and the bean-picking, Janie enjoys her stay there. Every evening, people tell stories and play cards, and laughter is the common denominator of every activity, whether work or play. Even when the roars of the hurricane begin, the people continue to laugh at the stories being told. Hurston presents folklore at its best in the Everglades scenes, and as Robert Bone says, "Tea-Cake is an incarnation of the folk culture" (130). As Janie and Tea Cake flee the natural disaster, he is bitten by a rabid dog and a few weeks later contracts rabies. As the rabies affects his nervous system, he

loses his mind, and Janie kills him in self-defense. An all-white jury acquits her, and she returns to Eatonville to tell Pheoby her story of finding love and self-esteem through Tea Cake.

As in Jonah's Gourd Vine, Hurston includes both intraracial and interracial comments and situations. Most of the intraracial statements come in Eatonville after Tea Cake takes over the town. The residents laugh at the idea of their having a post office and at Tea Cake for trying to bring one to their town. Taking up for Tea Cake, Joe tells his accusers, "Us colored folks is too envious of one 'nother. Dat's how come us don't git no further than us do. Us talks about de white man keepin' us down! Shucks! He don't have tuh. Us keeps our own selves down" (37). Joe's ambition brings about many changes and resentment in Eatonville. When Joe forces the men to dig a ditch which, coincidentally, would drain the area in front of his store, the people grumble "hotly about slavery being over" (44). Joe and Janie's new two-story house makes the neighboring houses look "like servants' quarters surrounding the 'big house'" (44). Janie's flowery "little lady-size spitting pot" causes the other ladies to become dissatisfied with the tomato cans they use for spitting (45). Uncertain of what other new inventions they are unfamiliar with, they consider the secrecy surrounding the changes:

Like things had been kept from them. Maybe more things in the world besides spitting pots had been hid from them, when they wasn't told no better than to spit in tomato cans. It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder. (45)

As previously mentioned, Joe Starks's superior attitude concerns them, but they rarely voice any dissenting opinions. Starks, of course, sees them as more interested in play than work, an opinion he states to Janie, who enjoys their laughter: "But all the same, Ah wish mah people would git mo' business in 'em and not spend so much time on foolishness" (59). The differences in class and ambition between Joe and the townspeople indicate the intraracial struggle in Eatonville.

In raceless fiction as a whole, no character, black or white, feels more dissatisfaction with her own race than Mrs. Turner, whose "disfavorite subject was Negroes" (134). Unhappy living in the Everglades and belonging to a different class from the other workers, she does everything possible to belittle the blackest members of her own race. She tells Janie, "Ah can't stand black niggers. Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin' 'em 'cause Ah can't stand 'em maself" (135). In a passage unlike any other in the raceless works previously

discussed, Mrs. Turner blames the race problem on the darkest Negroes:

And dey makes me tired. Always laughin'! Dey laughs too much and dey laughs too loud. Always singin' ol' nigger songs! Always cuttin' de monkey for white folks. If it wuzn't for so many black folks it wouldn't be no race problem. De white folks would take us in wid dem. De black ones is holdin' us back. (135)

John Lowe believes that Mrs. Turner's remark about "cuttin' the monkey for white folks" is Hurston's barb against the critics who accused her of doing the same (308). Though terribly unhappy, Mrs. Turner seems most contented when discussing her brother, who at the Sunday School Convention, "read uh paper on Booker T. Washington and tore him tuh pieces" (136).

Tea Cake, with his dark skin and his laughter, despises Mrs. Turner when he overhears her talking with Janie. Seeking revenge, he orchestrates a fight in Mrs. Turner's restaurant; as a result, the restaurant is destroyed, causing Mrs. Turner to label them "no count niggers" (145). She hopes to leave immediately for Miami, "where folks is civilized" (145). Arrogantly, Mrs. Turner classifies blacks according to pigment, not class or status in the community. The closer to the white race one appears, the better Mrs. Turner will treat him. Her

philosophy for treating other people appears in Hurston's appraisal of her: "Like the pecking order in a chicken yard. Insensate cruelty to those you can whip, and groveling submission to those you can't" (138). Hurston's criticism of prejudice effectively crosses color lines and condemns the color-consciousness she saw even in her own race.

As in Jonah's Gourd Vine, most of Hurston's references to white people appear as comments made only in passing, not as social criticism or protest. In fact, Hurston characterizes positively the white doctor who diagnoses Tea Cake's illness, the white family that helped Nanny rear Janie, and white people who run a restaurant. Besides these portrayals, Hurston includes a discussion among the Eatonville residents, who conclude that white folks probably will not care whether they have a post office or not. In one of the folktale sessions on the front porch, the men are discussing "uh great big old scoundrel" at Hall's filling station. The conversation leads to the topic of how the age of a substance can be determined, even something a million years old. One of the storytellers adds, "Man, dese white folks got ways for tellin' anything dey wants tuh know" (62). These comments reflect either positive or disinterested treatment of white people on the part of African-Americans.

Hurston's account of Janie's trial after killing Tea

Cake in self-defense favors the white participants and spectators far more than the black spectators. Davis maintains:

In the subsequent trial the white judge, the white lawyer, and the all-white jury are all far more understanding than Janie's Negro friends and acquaintances. In short, this is another good-will novel dramatizing the racial philosophy of Zora Neale Hurston--a racial philosophy which present-day black writers would consider incredible. (116-17)

As she observes the white all-male jury, Janie wishes that she could instead make the white women in the audience understand her love for Tea Cake and the dilemma in which she found herself when she had to kill him. Females are more likely to empathize with her position, she believes, than the male jury will be able to do. In contrast to the behavior of the white members of the audience, the black spectators become unruly, make noise, and try to testify in Tea Cake's behalf. When their noises continue, the prosecuting attorney yells to the black members of the audience, "Another word out of you, out of any of you niggers back there, and I'll bind you over to the big court" (178). Hurston's trial scene creates the impression that all of the white people present want Janie to win the case while all the black people present want

her to lose. In Hurston's defense, such a description may have little to do with portraying too positively the white race, but instead she must show Janie's friends and acquaintances turning against her so that Janie's singularity and emerging independence can become clear to the reader.

A more negative attitude toward white people comes early in Their Eyes Were Watching God in Nanny's conversation with Janie about the role of the black woman. In this discussion, Nanny tells what her life was like during slavery, and she attempts to instruct Janie on what the black woman's position is in society. Indicting both the white race and black men, Nanny tells Janie what her future could be like:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.

(14)

One of the most memorable quotations from the novel, it typifies the role that Janie wants to leave behind as she

gains her own freedom. Hurston hopes the reader will juxtapose Nanny and the way she had to lead her life with Janie and her newfound freedom and happiness. Though negative in tone, Nanny's statement about the societal pecking order provides the necessary contrast to emphasize Janie's change in the novel.

Though Davis believes that "there is . . . no bitterness toward whites in Their Eyes Were Watching God" (116), the actions of some of the white people during the emergencies brought on by the hurricane demand an examination. As the storm worsens and the flood waters rise, all people, black and white, are fleeing the Everglades for higher ground and shelter. Already exhausted and fearing for their lives, Janie and Tea Cake hope to reach the six-mile bridge, one of the only high and safe places available. Stumbling toward the bridge, however, they notice that "white people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room" (156). Had they been able to stay at the bridge, they would not have encountered the rabid dog, whose bite later costs Tea Cake his life.

The scene involving the most despicable white characters in the novel comes after Janie and Tea Cake reach safety in Palm Beach. Since the storm is over, the cleanup must begin, and the dead must be buried. Janie warns Tea Cake that the authorities could impress him into

helping with burying the bodies. Despite her advice, Tea Cake ventures out to find work. Two white men with guns tell Tea Cake to come with them to bury the dead. When Tea Cake does not move immediately, the men threaten him with their rifles. Both black and white men are impressed into service because of the emergency. When the burials begin, the guards instruct the men to determine the race of each victim, either by his color or his hair. Those found to be white receive burial in a pine coffin, but the black victims are dumped into a large ditch. Tea Cake comments to a fellow worker, "They's mighty particular how dese dead folks goes tuh judgment. Look lak dey think God don't know nothin' 'bout de Jim Crow law" (163). After Tea Cake escapes from the work crew, he tells Janie that Negroes belong in a place where white people know them. He summarizes his view of the black man's treatment by white people: "De ones de white man know is nice colored folks. . . . Each and every white man think he know all de GOOD darkies already" (164). The burial scene and the injustices heaped on the bodies of the black victims create the strongest anti-white sentiment in the novel.

Though Hurston received frequent criticism during her lifetime for not writing enough about racial issues, Hemenway believes that by almost ignoring white people and situations involving them, Hurston implicitly told white people:

Contrary to your arrogant assumptions, you have not really affected us that much; we continue to practice our own culture, which as a matter of fact is more alive, more esthetically pleasing than your own; and it is not solely a product of defensive reactions to your actions. (Zora Neale Hurston 221)

Her critics argue that the society and life in all-black Eatonville do not adequately reflect the whole picture, but June Jordan feels that Hurston's look at the insulated black community becomes a work of protest: "The affirmation of Black values and lifestyles within the American context, is indeed, an act of protest" (5). Hurston argued that the more militant writers created a "'false picture'" too since their literature seems "'saturated with our sorrows'" (qtd. in Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston 220).

Hurston's reason for writing raceless fiction remains unresolved. Gloster notes that Hurston is more interested "in folklore and dialect than in social criticism" (237). Young believes that Hurston "was able to dramatize elements of universal significance while confining her story entirely within the reality of black experience" (223). Mary Katherine Wainwright agrees that by doing this, Hurston "refused to participate in an either/or logic (black versus white) that underlies much black

fiction and only confirms blacks' alienation from and battle against the prevailing white tradition" (241). Hurston's love of folklore, her years in Eatonville, and her training in anthropology led her to write about universal characters and themes instead of serving as a spokesman for her race. Both Jonah's Gourd Vine and Their Eyes Were Watching God include both intraracial and interracial conflicts, but they exist only to further Hurston's accounts of the rural South and its folklore, illustrating her own words: "I don't see life through the eyes of a Negro, but those of a person" (qtd. in Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston 289).

Paula Giddings, evaluating Hurston's place in African-American literature, observes "Hurston's work was controversial because she neither romanticized Black folk life nor condemned it, thus falling between two schools of cultural thought" (193). The latter school, the school of condemnation, anticipates the rise of Richard Wright and his followers, whose writings stressed themes of racial oppression. Young notes that Wright and other young critics of the 1930s resented both the "genteel writers" and the writers of "romantic primitivism," which would include Henderson, Bontemps, Cullen, Fauset, and Hurston (134). This tension and controversy over the direction of African-American literature moved inexorably by the end of the decade toward the decline of the raceless novel and

the advent of the Wright School.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion: The Decline of the Raceless Novels and Their Authors: Changing Times, Native Son, and the Wright School

In 1937, the same year Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God appeared, Richard Wright published "Blueprint for Negro Writing," his views on the role of the black writer and his works. Also in 1937 and 1938, both Richard Wright and Alain Locke respectively published reviews that harshly criticized Their Eyes Were Watching God and Hurston, in particular, for neglecting her role as a social writer. Wright's and Locke's remarks reflect a new direction in black literature toward a more militant tone, a shift firmly established by Wright's publication of Native Son in 1940. As a result, the raceless novelists were forced to seek other options or to cease writing altogether. Richard Wright's comments and writings, combined with the Wright School that followed, brought about the end of the raceless novel for years to come.

In "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright recounts the history of black writing and then gives his goals for future black writers. Undoubtedly referring to the raceless novels of the 1930s, Wright remarks:

Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past

has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. (53)

Wright feels that too little has been "addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations" (54).

What does Wright believe should be the role of the black writer? He feels that the black writer should possess "a deep, informed, and complete consciousness" (59). This "complete consciousness," Wright believes, will enable the writer "to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships" (59). Wright hopes that black writers will address more thoroughly elements of their own racial experience, to offer a fuller picture of the Negro in America. He clarifies his goal by adding:

This does not mean that a Negro's sole concern must be with rendering the social scene; but if his conception of the life of his people is broad and deep enough, if the sense of the whole life he is seeking is vivid and strong in him, then his writing will embrace all those social,

political, and economic forms under which the life of his people is manifest. (62)

Wright's concerns over the black artist's portrayal of the "whole life" put him at odds with Zora Hurston's writings. Wright felt that Hurston propagated the minstrel image and that she denied the complexity of the Negro experience. In his 1937 review for New Masses of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Wright bitterly wrote:

Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears. (7)

What Hurston called folklore and enjoyed writing about, Wright called an incomplete portrayal of Negro life in America.

Similarly, Alain Locke, long a supporter of Hurston and her work, wrote a negative review of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Though he praises Hurston's storytelling ability and her use of folklore as "folklore fiction at its best," he criticizes the novel because folklore is its "main point" (18). Furthermore, he

wonders when Hurston plans to "come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction" (18). Wright's, Locke's, and other similar reviews deeply hurt Hurston, but they reflect the changes evident in black writing toward more social consciousness and away from the raceless themes. Hemenway adds that Hurston had to deal with "the frustration of an author whose novelistic talents were deprecated because her fiction dealt with intraracial folkloric situations rather than with interracial confrontations--it was not 'social document fiction'" (242).

The differences between Hurston's and Wright's philosophies became more pronounced with Wright's 1940 publication of Native Son. In the 1937 "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright outlined his philosophy, but in Native Son, he illustrated a striking example of his philosophy. Arthur Davis concludes that Wright's basic objective in writing was "to express the great social crime that America perpetrated upon the black masses and the effects of that crime on the life and the personality of the Negro" (149). In fact, Davis questions whether this is Wright's "only theme" (149). Donald Gibson notes how different Wright's Native Son is from previous black writing: "No previously published plays, poems, or fiction by a black writer bears much resemblance to Wright's work" (82). Gibson concludes that the greatest difference "is

in Wright's insistence that black people have power" (82). Wright's interest in empowering black characters and creating a militant tone becomes clear in his essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born," in which he attempts to describe his motivations for and influences in writing Native Son. Referring to the rather quiet reception of his 1938 short story collection Uncle Tom's Children, Wright wrote:

I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest. (Native Son xxvii)

From the outset of the novel, the reader can quickly see how radically different a character Bigger Thomas is from the characters of Henderson, Bontemps, Cullen, Fauset, and Hurston. Unlike the black men and women of the raceless novels, who do experience some degree of happiness, Bigger knows only poverty, hatred, violence, and insecurity. These factors combine to make Bigger one of the most volatile characters in black fiction, culminating in the brutal deaths of Mary Dalton, his white employers' daughter, and Bessie, his black girlfriend. Living in a Chicago slum and having only an eighth-grade

education, Bigger finds his chances for advancement very limited. Wright reveals Bigger's own frustration at his situation: "He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them" (13). Hatred also typifies Bigger's attitude toward white people. When Bigger notices Mary's beauty and her slender frame, he sees her "with an air that made him feel that she did not hate him with the hate of other white people. But, for all of that, she was white and he hated her" (81). Believing Bigger's actions stem from his environment, Wright rightfully has earned the label, the "first black literary naturalist" (Gibson 87). What Bigger wants from life is to move from a feeling of being powerless to a feeling of having power and being in control. Bigger's first surge of power comes after he accidentally kills Mary Dalton and burns her body. The more he thinks about his crime, the more power and sense of control he feels. In fact, he considers a public confession of his crime:

He looked out of the car window and then round at the white faces near him. He wanted suddenly to stand up and shout, telling them that he had killed a rich white girl, a girl whose family was known to all of them. Yes; if he did that a look of startled horror would come over their faces. But, no. He would not do that, even

though the satisfaction would be keen. (123)  
Again, Bigger feels in control when he rapes Bessie and  
throws her down the elevator shaft, leaving her to die.  
Despite the two violent crimes, Bigger feels "a queer  
sense of power" (224). Wright describes Bigger's thoughts  
and his sense of accomplishment resulting from the  
killings:

He had done this. He had brought all this  
about. In all of his life these two murders  
were the most meaningful things that had ever  
happened to him. He was living, truly and  
deeply, no matter what others might think,  
looking at him with their blind eyes. (225)

Bigger's violent crimes lead to his own violent end; he is  
tried and sentenced to die.

Besides the revolutionary characterization of Bigger  
Thomas, Wright also creates more openly hostile  
black-white relationships than the raceless novels  
presented. Bigger has heard that black people have to pay  
twice as much rent as white people for the same kind of  
flats, that black people in Chicago cannot live outside of  
the Black Belt, and that white people had bombed some  
houses when black people first moved into the South Side  
(233, 172). However bad these conditions are, the racial  
tension becomes worse after Bigger is accused of killing  
Mary. His belief "that whites thought that all Negroes

yearned for white women" and Bessie's remark that the police assume that Bigger raped Mary indicate their distrust over the possibilities of a fair trial for Bigger (185, 213). The conditions for all black Chicago residents get worse when the manhunt for Bigger begins. The white community becomes outraged and reacts harshly toward the black community: the mayor issues a blanket search warrant for every Negro home, windows in the Negro sections are smashed, vigilante groups are formed, and many Negro employees are dismissed from their jobs--all because of the search for Bigger Thomas (229).

Injustice occurs as well in the court system. An accused murderer, Bigger understands that he will be tried for only one murder:

Though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was merely "evidence". . . . he knew that the white people did not really care about Bessie's being killed. . . . Crime for a Negro was only when he harmed whites, took white lives, or injured white property. (307)

Another indictment of the court system comes when the judge allows Buckley, the prosecuting attorney, to use racially offensive language when describing Bigger. Buckley uses the terms "half-human black ape," "black mad

dog," "rapacious beast," "black cur," "maddened ape," and "treacherous beast" to describe either Bigger directly or those like him (373-76). Almost making the case a white versus black issue instead of the State versus Bigger Thomas, Buckley attempts to arouse the indignation of the white race:

Every decent white man in America ought to swoon with joy for the opportunity to crush with his heel the woolly head of this black lizard, to keep him from scuttling on his belly farther over the earth and spitting forth his venom of death! (373)

Besides these illustrations of blatant prejudice and violations of civil rights, Wright uses a more subtle approach with the ostensibly good white characters. At first glance, the reader wonders what finer white family could be Bigger's employers than the Daltons and their beautiful daughter Mary. Wright, however, characterizes the Daltons as both condescending and hypocritical. When Bigger drives Mary and her communist friend Jan around town, Mary and Jan insist on discussing Negro matters and eating at Ernie's Chicken Shack, frequented only by Negro patrons. Later, the topic moves to spirituals, and Jan and Mary sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" for Bigger. All of these seemingly altruistic kindnesses appear condescending to Bigger and make him feel embarrassed and

uncomfortable. Also, Wright characterizes the Daltons as hypocritical in their attitudes toward black people. True, they do hire Bigger, despite his previous problems with the law, and they do give millions of dollars to black institutions, but Bigger realizes that Dalton's South Side Real Estate Company is the same company that owns his house, for which "he paid eight dollars a week for one rat-infested room" (164). In court, Buckley, of course, portrays the Daltons as doing anything possible to assist the black race, but Max, Bigger's attorney, notes the contradiction in Mr. Dalton's slum housing and his beneficent contributions: "So the profits you take from the Thomas family in rents, you give back to them to ease the pain of their gouged lives and to salve the ache of your own conscience?" (304).

Bigger reacts positively to only two white characters in Native Son: Max, his attorney, and Jan. Interestingly, Wright's positive portrayal of these two characters may be because they are both communists, as was Richard Wright at the time he wrote this novel (Bone 143). Regardless of the reason, both Max and Jan attempt to understand Bigger and treat him humanely. Max brings Bigger clothes, says he understands Bigger's distrust of white people, and tries hard to represent Bigger fairly in court. Though Bigger falsely accuses Jan of Mary's murder, Jan, nevertheless, visits Bigger in prison and wants to help

him. He asks Bigger not to hate him though he knows every other white man who sees Bigger hates him merely because of his skin color. Despite Jan's feeling of extreme loss over Mary's death, he compares his loss to "the black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them in slavery and since slavery" (268). Jan's attempt to befriend Bigger impresses him so much that "for the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him" (268). To a certain extent, Wright's positive white characters resemble the white characters in the raceless novels, but Wright stresses much more the fact that they are caring communists, not just white characters.

The enormous popularity of Native Son did much to overshadow the raceless novels of the 1930s. The unsettling content, the critical success, and the popular success elicited a great deal of attention. Irving Howe went so far as to say: "The day Native Son appeared, America was changed forever" (100). In 1948, Gloster called Native Son "the most perdurable and influential novel yet written by an American Negro" (233). John Milton Charles Hughes believes that the publication of Native Son was "the first time a novel by a Negro author was phenomenally successful" (197), and Arthur Davis adds, "The critical response to Native Son was greater than to any other prior publication by a Negro" (153). Its open message of militant protest rang clear to

readers, both black and white. Describing the novel's reaction on both races, Howe explains, "A blow at the white man, the novel forced him to recognize himself as an oppressor. A blow at the black man, the novel forced him to recognize the cost of his submission" (101). Barbara Christian feels that Native Son shows that the black man, tired of his submission, will eventually rise up against his oppressor if America does not "recognize its native sons and give them their due" (63).

Wright's militant message served as the major influence for black writers for decades to come. Especially in the decade following Native Son, it remained popular to write social protest. In The Negro Novel in America, Robert Bone entitles one section "The Wright School," discussing the many writers of the forties whose works display the influence of Richard Wright. Recognizing the prominence of protest in the forties, Bone lists the following writers and works as the Wright School: Carl Offord's The White Face (1943), Chester Himes's If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945) and Lonely Crusade (1947), Curtis Lucas's Third Ward Newark (1946), Ann Petry's The Street (1946), Alden Bland's Behold a Cry (1947), William Gardner Smith's Last of the Conquerors (1948), and Willard Savoy's Alien Land (1949) (158-59).

Lost in this plethora of protest of the forties was the raceless novel. No longer fashionable in a world of

social realism, the raceless novel almost completely disappeared. And what about its writers--Bontemps, Henderson, Cullen, Fauset, and Hurston--all important literary figures of the thirties? In every case, these writers turned to other genres or ceased writing altogether shortly after writing the raceless novels discussed here. Arna Bontemps, after publishing God Sends Sunday, wrote children's books and then Black Thunder (1936) and Drums at Dusk (1938), both much more militant in tone, dealing with slaves and their uprisings. George Wylie Henderson wrote only one more novel, July (1946), which has much more protest than Ollie Miss. Known primarily as a poet, Cullen wrote only the novel One Way to Heaven, which enjoyed a successful stage adaptation. Later, Cullen turned to teaching and children's stories. After Jessie Fauset wrote The Chinaberry Tree, she wrote Comedy: American Style (1933) with a more pessimistic ending. Abby Johnson concludes, "The times had changed and Fauset had neither the energy nor the will to change with them. . . . she felt an identity with a black community which was no longer fashionable" (153). Zora Hurston published her findings about the West Indies in Tell My Horse (1938), the novel Moses, Man of the Mountain (1939), and her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road (1942). Hurston's last novel, Seraph on the Suwanee (1948), primarily uses white characters, a radical

departure from her previous works. This departure could have been a result of the heavy criticism she faced for her portrayal of black characters in her other works or her recognition of the popularity of the Wright School in the forties.

Never an organized literary movement, the genre of raceless fiction functioned instead as several writers' individual attempts to focus on the lives of black Americans, not "defeated, humiliated, degraded, or victimized" (Washington, Introduction, I Love Myself When I Am Laughing 16). Using little racial tension and even less propaganda, the novels deal with race much more as an element of characterization than as the burden of theme. Perhaps because of the publishing market during the Great Depression, perhaps because of their middle-class backgrounds, or perhaps because of their interest in just telling a good story, these writers chose raceless situations. Though later overshadowed by Native Son and the Wright School of the forties, Henderson's Ollie Miss, Bontemps's God Sends Sunday, Cullen's One Way to Heaven, Fauset's The Chinaberry Tree, and Hurston's Jonah's Gourd Vine and Their Eyes Were Watching God, nevertheless, deserve their place as significant raceless novels in African-American literature.

## Foreword to The Chinaberry Tree

Nothing,--and the Muses themselves would bear witness to this,--has ever been farther from my thought than writing to establish a thesis. Colored people have been the subjects which I have chosen for my novels partly because they are the ones I know best, partly because of all the other separate groups which constitute the American cosmogony none of them, to me, seems so naturally endowed with the stuff of which chronicles may be made. To be a Negro in America posits a dramatic situation. The elements of the play fall together involuntarily; they are just waiting for Fate the Producer to quicken them into movement,--for Chance the Prompter to interpret them with fidelity.

The mere juxtaposition of the races brings into existence this fateful quality. But of course there are breathing-spells, in-between spaces where colored men and women work and love and go their ways with no thought of the "problem." What are they like then? . . . So few of the other Americans know.

In the story of Aunt Sal, Laurentine, Melissa and the Chinaberry Tree I have depicted something of the homelife of the colored American who is not being pressed too hard by the Furies of Prejudice, Ignorance, and Economic Injustice. And behold he is not so vastly different from any other American, just distinctive. He is not rich but

he moves in a society which has its spheres and alignments as definitely as any other society the world over. He is simple as befits one whose not too remote ancestors were connected with the soil, yet his sons and daughters respond as completely as do the sons and daughters of European settlers to modern American sophistication. He has seen, he has been the victim of many phases of immorality but he has his own ideas about certain "Thou shalt nots." And acts on them.

Finally he started out as a slave but he rarely thinks of that. To himself he is a citizen of the United States whose ancestors came over not along with the emigrants in the Mayflower, it is true, but merely a little earlier in the good year, 1619. His forebears are to him quite simply the early settlers who played a pretty large part in making the land grow. He boasts no Association of the Sons and Daughters of the Revolution, but he knows that as a matter of fact and quite inevitably his sons and daughters date their ancestry as far back as any. So quite as naturally as his white compatriots he speaks of his "old" Boston families, "old Philadelphians," "old Charlestonians." And he has a wholesome respect for family and education and labor and the fruits of labor. He is still sufficiently conservative to lay a slightly greater stress on the first two of these four.

Briefly he is a dark American who wears his joy and

re very much as does the white American. He may wear it with some differences but it is the same joy and the same re.

So in spite of other intentions I seem to have pointed a moral. (ix-x)

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